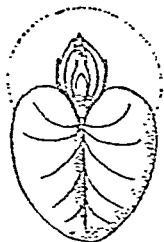
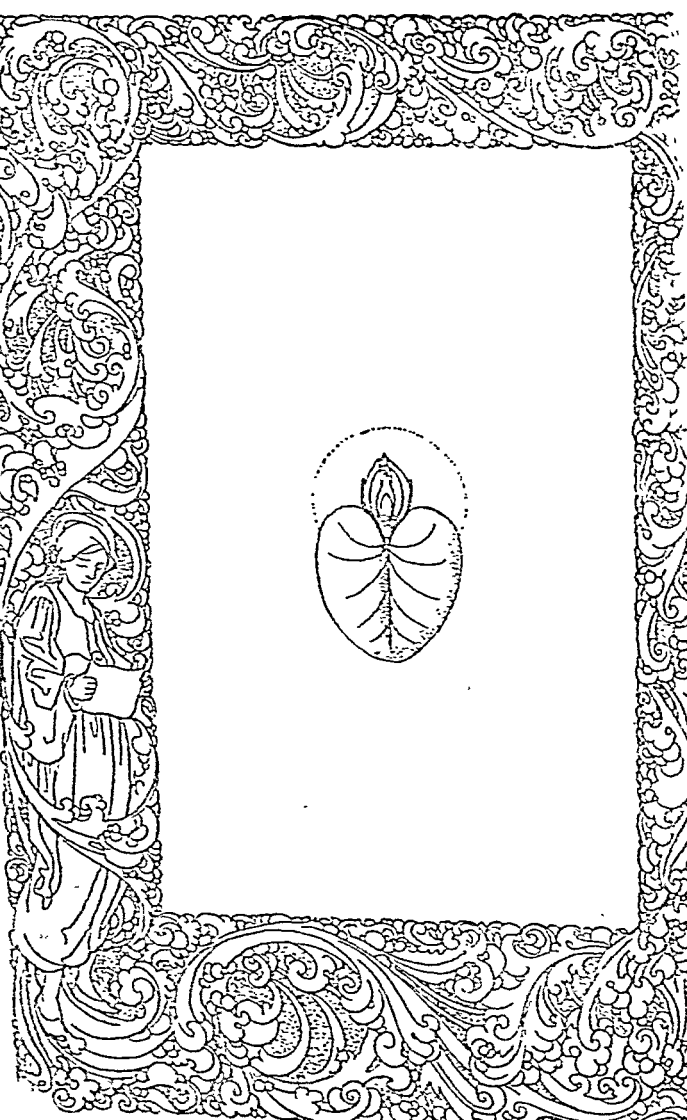


THE MAHARANA BHUPAL
COLLEGE LIBRARY
UDAIPUR

BOOK MUST BE RETURNED ON
BEFORE THE DATE LAST
SPECIFIED BELOW.

THE TRAGEDY OF A GENIUS





THE TRAGEDY OF A GENIUS

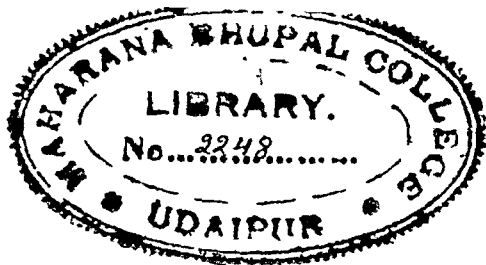
by
HONORÉ DE BALZAC

TRANSLATED BY
Henry Blanchamp

London & Glasgow
COLLINS' CLEAR-TYPE PRESS



Manufactured in Great Britain



TO MADAME JOSÉPHINE DELANNOY,
NÉE DOUMERC

M ADAM,—May God grant to this work a longer life than mine! The gratitude I have vowed to you, which, I hope, will equal your almost motherly affection for me, would then endure beyond the term fixed for our feelings. The sublime privilege of thus extending the life of the heart by the life of our works would suffice, if there were ever any certainty in that respect, as a consolation for all the pains it costs those whose ambition it is to win the privilege. So I shall repeat: May it please God!

DE BALZAC.

THE TRAGEDY OF A GENIUS

I

AT Douai, in the Rue de Paris, there is a house whose physiognomy, inward arrangements, and details have preserved, better than those of any other, the character of the old Flemish buildings, which are so simply suitable to the patriarchal ways of that good country; but, before describing it, perhaps it is necessary, in the interest of writers, to lay down the needfulness of the didactic preparations against which protest is raised by certain ignorant, greedy persons, who would like emotions without knowing their generative principles, a flower without the seed; a child without gestation. Should it indeed be maintained that art is stronger than nature?

The happenings of human life, whether public or private, are so intimately allied to architecture, that most observers can reconstruct nations or individuals in all the truth of their habits according to the remains of their public monuments, or by an examination of their domestic remains. Archæ-

8 The Tragedy of a Genius

ology is to social nature what comparative anatomy is to organised nature. A mosaic reveals a whole society, as the skeleton of an ichthyosaurus implies a whole creation. There is everywhere deduction, concatenation. The cause enables one to guess an effect, as every effect enables one to go back to a cause. So the savant resurrects even the warts of antiquity. Whence doubtless springs the prodigious interest inspired by an architectural description, when the writer's fantasy does not denaturalise its elements; cannot everyone link it to the past by close reasoning? and for man the past is singularly like the future; is not telling him what was, almost always telling him what shall be?

In fact, it is rare for a portrayal of places where life is flowing away to fail to recall to everyone either his disappointed desires or his flowering hopes. The comparison between a present which disappoints secret wishes and the future which may realise them is an inexhaustible source of melancholy or of sweet gratifications. So it is almost impossible not to be seized with a kind of affection at the painting of Flemish life, when its accessories are well rendered. Why? Perhaps, among different existences, it is the one that puts the best termination to man's uncertainties. It is accompanied by all the fêtes, all the family ties, by a fat comfort which attests the continuity of well-being, by a restfulness which resembles beatitude; it especially expresses the calm and monotony

The Tragedy of a Genius 9

of a naively sensual happiness in which enjoyment stifles desire by always anticipating it.

Whatever value a man of passion may attach to tumults of the feelings, he never sees without emotion the symbols of that social nature in which heart-beats are so well regulated that superficial people accuse it of coldness. The crowd generally prefer an abnormal force which overflows to an equable force which persists. The crowd has neither the time nor patience to realise the huge power hidden under a uniform appearance. Therefore, in order to strike that crowd which is carried away by the current of life, passion, even like a great artist, has no way left but to go beyond its goal, as in the cases of Michelangelo, Bianca Capello, Mlle de la Vallière, Beethoven and Paganini. The great calculators alone think the goal must never be passed, and have only respect for potentiality impressed in a perfect accomplishment which puts into every work the deep calm whose charm attracts superior men.

Now, the life adopted by this essentially economical people fulfils well the conditions of felicity of which the masses dream for middle-class, burgess life.

The most exquisite materiality is stamped on all Flemish customs. English comfort displays dry tints, harsh tones; whilst in Flanders the antique interior of the households delights the eye with mellow colours, with a true good-fellowship; it implies work without weariness; the

10 The Tragedy of a Genius

pipe signifies a happy application of Neapolitan *far niente*; then there is noticeable a peaceful feeling for art, its most necessary condition, patience, and conscience, an element which makes its creation lasting; the Flemish character lies in those two words, patience and conscience, which seem to exclude the rich shades of poetry and make existence in this land as flat as its broad plains, as cold as its foggy sky. Yet it is nothing of the sort. Civilisation has there exerted its power in modifying everything, even the effects of the climate.

If you observe attentively the products of the various countries of the globe, you are at first surprised to note that grey, tawny hues are especially affected among the productions of temperate zones, whilst the most dazzling hues distinguish those of hot countries. Modes of life have necessarily to conform to that law of nature. Flanders, which was once essentially brown and devoted to combined tints, found the means of introducing brightness into its smoky air through the political changes which subdued it successively to the Burgundians, Spaniards, French, and which put it on a brotherly footing with the Germans and Dutch. From Spain they have retained the luxury of scarlets, brilliant satins, vigorously-designed tapestry, feathers, mandolins and forms of courtesy. From Venice they got in exchange for their canvas and lace the fantastic glassware in which wine gleams again and seems the

The Tragedy of a Genius 11

better. From Austria they have kept the ponderous diplomacy which according to a popular saying "marches three steps in a bushel." Trade with India introduced China's grotesque inventions and Japan's wonders. Still, despite its patience in collecting everything, giving up nothing, enduring everything, Flanders could hardly be considered as anything but the general shop of Europe, till the discovery of tobacco welded by means of smoke the scattered features of its national physiognomy. Thenceforth, however their territory might be parcelled out, the Flemish people existed by their pipes and their beer.

- After having assimilated by the persevering economy of its conduct the riches and ideas of its masters or its neighbours, this country, naturally so dreary and devoid of poetry, framed for itself an original life and characteristic morals, without appearing tainted by servility. Its art despoiled all ideality in order to reproduce solely form. Accordingly, do not look for plastic poetry nor the verve of comedy nor dramatic action nor the bold outbursts of epic or ode nor musical genius ; but it is fertile in discoveries, in erudite discussions requiring time and the lamp. Everything is stamped for temporal enjoyment. A man there sees exclusively what is, his thought is so scrupulously bent on serving life's needs, that in no work has it sprung beyond the real world.

The only notion of a future conceived by this people was a sort of economy in politics, its revolu-

12 The Tragedy of a Genius

tionary force came from the domestic desire to have elbow-room at table and enjoy perfect ease beneath the penthouse of its *steedes*. The feeling of well-being and the spirit of independence inspired by fortune engendered there more than anywhere else the need of freedom which later fermented Europe. Likewise the constancy of their ideas and the tenacity which education gives the Flemings made them formerly a formidable people when defending their rights. Nothing among them is half-done, neither houses nor furniture nor dykes nor cultivation nor rebellion. Thus it retains the monopoly of its existence. The manufacture of lace, the work of patient agriculture and yet more patient industry, the making of canvas are as hereditary as its patrimonial fortunes.

If you wanted to paint constancy in the purest human shape you would perhaps be within the truth if you took the portrait of a worthy burgo-master of the Low Counties, capable, as has often happened, of dying burgess-like without blare of fame for the interests of his Hanse towns. But the gentle poetry of this patriarchal life will naturally be found in the depicting of one of the last houses which at the time when this story begins still preserved its characteristics at Douai.

Of all the towns in the Département du Nord Douai is, alas ! that which is becoming quickest modern, where the innovating feeling has made

The Tragedy of a Genius 13

the rapidest conquests, where love of social progress is the most widely spread. The old buildings vanish daily, the ancient modes of life pass away. The tone, the ways, the fashions of Paris are dominant; and of the old Flemish life there will soon only be left to the Douaisians their cordial hospitality, their Spanish courtesy, their Dutch wealth and cleanliness. Hotels in white stone will have replaced the brick houses. The substantialness of Batavian forms will have yielded to the changing elegance of French novelties.

The house in which the events of our story happened is about in the middle of the Rue de Paris, and has been known at Douai for more than two hundred years as "Claes House." The Van Claes were once one of the most famous families of artisans to whom the Netherlands owed in several products a commercial supremacy which they have kept. For a long time the Claes from father to son were the heads of the powerful brotherhood of weavers in the town of Ghent. At the time of the revolt of that great city against Charles V, who wanted to suppress its privileges, the richest of the Claes was so deeply compromised that, foreseeing a disaster and compelled to share the lot of his comrades, he sent away secretly to the protection of France his wife, children and wealth, before the Emperor's troops had invested the town. The foresight of the syndic of the weavers was justified. Like several other burgesses he was excepted from the capitulation and hung as a

16 The Tragedy of a Genius

The spirit of old Flanders breathed again in its entirety in that dwelling, which displayed to lovers of burgess antiquities the type of the modest mansions which the rich burgessry built themselves in the Middle Ages.

The principal ornament of the façade was a door with two oaken folding-leaves furnished with nails arranged quincunx-fashion, in the centre of which the Claes out of pride had had sculptured two shuttles coupled. The bay of the door, built in sandstone, terminated in a pointed arch which supported a small lantern topped by a cross, in which was seen a statuette of St. Geneviève spinning at her distaff. Although time had discoloured the delicate work on the door and lantern, the extreme care taken of them by the occupiers of the house enabled passers-by to grasp all the details. So the door-case, composed of assembled colonnettes, kept a dark grey colour and glistened so that you might believe it had been varnished.

On either side of the door on the ground-floor were two windows similar to all the others in the house. The panes, small and in lozenges, were inserted in iron branches extremely thin and painted red. The walls, built in brick rejointed with a white mortar, were supported at intervals and at the angles by stone chains. The first floor was pierced by five windows ; the second had only three, and the attic drew its light from a big round opening with five divisions, bordered with

The Tragedy of a Genius 17

sandstone, and placed in the middle of the triangular pediment described by the gable end, like the rose in the portal of a cathedral. The top was crowned as with a weathercock by a distaff laden with flax. The two sides of the big triangle formed by the wall of the gable were cut squarely by a species of steps up to the coping of the first floor, where, to the right and left of the house, fell the rain-water cast out of the throat of a fantastic animal.

In the lower part of the house a course in sandstone simulated a stair. Finally—the last remains of ancient customs—on each side of the door, between the two windows, there was in the road a wooden trap-door garnished with large iron bands, by which one entered the cellars. Ever since its construction the façade was carefully cleaned twice a year. *If a little mortar was lacking* in a joint, the hole was at once stopped up. The windows, the sills, the stoves, all were more carefully dusted than the most valuable marbles are in Paris.

The front of the house therefore showed no trace of degradation. Despite the darkened hues caused by the very age of the bricks, it was as well preserved as an old picture, an old book might be, that were cherished by an amateur, and would always be new if they did not undergo the influence of gases in our atmosphere whose malignity threatens even ourselves. The cloudy sky, the damp climate of Flanders and the shadows

18 The Tragedy of a Genius

caused by the want of breadth of the street often robbed the building of the brightness lent by its exquisite cleanness, which, moreover, made it chill and gloomy to the eye. A poet would have liked some grass in the openings of the lantern or moss on the sandstone cuttings, he would have wished the rows of bricks to be cracked, that under the arches of the windows a swallow might have built its nest in the triple red divisions adorning them. Likewise the air of finish, the respectableness of this façade half worn away by rubbing, gave it a drily honest and becomingly estimable aspect, which would certainly have driven one of our romantics elsewhere had he lived opposite.

When a visitor had pulled the cord of the iron bell which hung beside the door-case, and the servant had opened the folding-leaf, in the middle of which was a small grating, the leaf carried by its weight at once fell back, giving forth a sound grave and heavy, as if the door had been of bronze, beneath the vaults of a spacious flagged gallery and in the depths of the house. The gallery, painted like marble, always fresh and sprinkled with a layer of thin sand, led to a large square interior court, paved with broad, polished square tiles and greenish in colour. On the left were the laundry, the kitchens, the servants' hall; on the right, the wood-house, the coal-store and the servants of the house, whose gates, windows, walls were adorned with designs kept exquisitely clean. The daylight, sifted between four red

The Tragedy of a Genius 19

walls striped with white filaments, contracted reflections and pink tints which lent the figures and smallest details a mysterious grace, as of fantastic apparitions.

A second house absolutely similar to the building fronting the street, which bears in Flanders the name of the "back quarters," rose at the further end of the court and served solely as the abode of the family. On the ground-floor the first room was a parlour lit by two windows on the side of the court and by two others looking on to a garden whose size equalled that of the house. Two parallel glass doors led the one to the garden, the other to the court, and corresponded to the street-door in such a way that a stranger on entering could understand the whole arrangement of the house, and perceive even the leafy branches at the other end of the garden.

The front part of the house, which was used for receptions and whose second floor contained the rooms reserved for strangers, certainly contained objects of art and vast accumulated wealth ; but nothing could equal in the eyes of the Claes nor in the judgment of a connoisseur the treasures that adorned the parlour where the family life had been spent for two centuries.

The Claes who died for the Ghentish liberties, the artisan of whom you would have too small a notion if the historian omitted to state that he possessed nearly forty thousand silver marks, gained in manufacturing the sails needful for the

20 The Tragedy of a Genius

all-powerful Venetian navy, this Claes numbered among his friends Van Huysium of Bruges, the celebrated sculptor in wood. The artist had several times dipped into the artisan's purse. Some time before the revolt of the Ghenters, Van Huysium, now rich, had secretly sculptured for his friend a wainscoting in massive ebony, in which were represented the chief scenes in the life of Artevelde, the brewer who was for a moment king of Flanders. Composed of sixty panels, it contained about fourteen hundred chief characters and passed for Van Huysium's masterpiece. The captain entrusted with the guarding of the burgesses whom Charles V had decided to hang on the day of his entry into his natal town proposed, it is said, to Van Claes to let him escape if he gave him Van Huysium's work; but the weaver had sent it to France. The parlour, entirely wainscoted with these panels, which, out of respect for the manes of the martyr, Van Huysium himself came and framed in wood painted in ultramarine mingled with golden filaments, is therefore the completest work of this master, whose least pieces are to-day worth almost their weight in gold.

Above the fireplace Van Claes, painted by Titian in his costume as president of the tribunal of the Parchons, seemed still to be presiding over his family, who worshipped in him their great man. The chimney-piece, originally in stone with a very high mantel, had been reconstructed in white marble in the last century, and supported

The Tragedy of a Genius 21

an old clock and two five-branched candlesticks, in bad taste, but of solid silver. The four windows were decorated with big curtains in red damask, with black flowers, lined with white silk, and the furniture of the same stuff had been renewed under Louis XIV. The flooring, evidently modern, consisted of large slabs of white wood framed by oak bands. The ceiling, formed of several cartouches at the bottom of which was a mask chiselled by Van Huysum, had been respected and retained the brown hues of Dutch oak. At the four corners of the parlour sprang up truncated columns, surmounted by candlesticks similar to those of the chimney-piece, a round table occupied the centre.

Card-tables were symmetrically arranged along the walls. On two gilt brackets set above white marble there were, at the time this story begins, two globes full of water in which red, gold and silver fish swam over a bed of sand and shells. The room was both bright and gloomy. The ceiling necessarily absorbed the brightness, without reflecting any of it. If on the side of the garden daylight was abundant and came and flitted about the ebony cuttings, the windows of the court, yielding little light, hardly made the golden filaments glitter which were impressed on the opposite walls. The parlour, so magnificent on a fine day, was therefore filled most of the time with the soft tints, with the red, melancholy tones with which the sun floods the tops of forests in autumn. It

22 The Tragedy of a Genius

is idle to continue the description of Claes House in the other parts of which several scenes of this tale will necessarily take place ; it suffices at the moment to be acquainted with its chief arrangements.

II

ONE Sunday, after Vespers, about the last days of August, 1812, a woman was sitting in an easy chair before one of the garden-windows. The sunbeams were then falling aslant on the house, took it slantingly, crossed the parlour, expired in bizarre reflections on the woodwork clothing the walls on the court side, and enveloped the woman in the purple zone cast by the damask curtain draped along the window. A mediocre painter who would have painted her at this moment would certainly have produced a notable work with a head so full of pain and sadness. The pose of the body and of the feet projected straight in front betrayed the dejection of a person who is losing consciousness of physical existence in a concentration of strength absorbed by a fixed thought ; she followed the branchings of it into the future, just as one often by the seashore gazes at a sunbeam piercing the clouds and tracing a luminous band on the horizon.

Her hands, rejected by the arms of the easy chair, hung outside it, and her head as if too heavy rested on the back of it. A very simple dress of white cotton cambric prevented a good judgment of her proportions, and the corsage was hidden

24 The Tragedy of a Genius

beneath the folds of a scarf crossed over her chest and carelessly knotted. Even had the light not set her face in relief, which she seemed to prefer bringing into it rather than the rest of her person, it would have been impossible then not to have been exclusively occupied with it ; her expression, which would have struck the most careless of children, was a persistent, cold stupefaction, despite some burning tears.

Nothing is more terrible to see than the extreme pain whose overflow only occurs at rare intervals, but which remained on her face like lava about a volcano. You would have thought her a dying mother obliged to leave her children in an abyss of poverty, without being able to bequeath to them any human protection. The physiognomy of this lady, who was about forty, but at that time much less distant from the beauty which she had never been in her youth, showed none of the character of a Flemish woman. Thick black hair fell in curls over her shoulders and along her cheeks. Her forehead, very projecting, narrow at the temples, was yellowish, but beneath it glittered two black eyes which shot forth flames. Her face, quite Spanish, brown in tone, slightly coloured, ravaged by smallpox, arrested the look by the perfection of the oval shape, whose contours, in spite of the alteration of the lines, preserved a finish of majestic elegance, which at times reappeared in its entirety when some effort of the soul restored to it its primitive purity. The feature

that gave most distinction to this masculine face was a nose curved like an eagle's beak, which, too prominent in the middle, seemed badly formed inside; but there was an indescribable refinement in it; the passage of the nostrils was so thin that its transparency allowed the light to give it a deep red hue. Although the wide, tightly compressed lips revealed the pride inspired by high birth, they were impressed with a natural kindness and promised courtesy.

The beauty of the vigorous face might be disputed, but it commanded attention. Small of stature and a cripple, this woman remained all the longer unmarried because people persisted in denying her any brains; however, several men were deeply moved by the passionate ardour which her head expressed, by the signs of an inexhaustible tenderness, and who remained under a spell irreconcilable with so many faults. She took much after her grandfather, the Duke de Casa-Réal, a Spanish grandee. At that moment, the charm, which once swayed so despotically the souls amorous of poetry, issued from her head more powerfully than at any instant of her past life, and exercised itself, so to speak, in the void, expressing a will to fascinate all-powerful over men, but without influence on their destinies.

When her eyes left the glass bowl, where she was looking at the fish without seeing them, she raised them with a despairing movement, as if to invoke

26 The Tragedy of a Genius

Heaven. Her sufferings seemed to be of those that can only be confided to God. The silence was only disturbed by some crickets, by some grasshoppers which shrilled in the little garden whence escaped a furnace-like heat, and by the dull sound of silver-plate, dishes and chairs which a servant engaged in serving up dinner was moving in the neighbouring room. At the moment the afflicted lady pricked up her ears and appeared to pull herself together ; she took her handkerchief, wiped away her tears, tried to smile, and so successfully abolished the look of grief engraved on all her features that you might have thought her to be in that state of indifference in which we are left by a life free from anxieties.

Whether the habit of living in that house to which her infirmities confined her had enabled her to recognise certain natural effects imperceptible to others, and persons who are a prey to extreme feelings are vivid seekers of such, whether Nature had rewarded her for so many physical defects by bestowing on her more delicate sensations than on beings apparently more advantageously organised, this woman had heard a man's step in a corridor built above the kitchens and the servants' rooms, by which the front portion of the house communicated with the rear.

The noise of steps became more and more distinct. Soon, without having the power with which a passionate creature like that woman is often able

The Tragedy of a Genius 27

to abolish space so as to unite herself with her other ego, a stranger would readily have heard a man's step on the staircase leading from the gallery to the parlour. As the step resounded the most inattentive person would have been assailed by thoughts, for it was impossible to listen to it coldly. A hurried or jerky walk frightens. When a man gets up and cries "Fire!" his feet are as eloquent as his voice. If it be so, an opposite walk cannot fail to cause equally powerful emotions. This man's grave slowness, his dragging footstep, would no doubt have made unthinking people impatient; but an observer or nervous people would have experienced a feeling akin to terror at the measured noise of those feet from which life seemed absent, and which made the planks creak as if two iron weights had struck them alternately. You would have recognised an old man's heavy, undecided step or the majestic walk of a thinker who is drawing whole worlds with him.

When the man had descended the last step, resting his feet on the flags with a movement full of hesitation, he remained a moment on the big landing where the passage leading to the servants' hall ended, and whence you could equally well enter the parlour by a door hidden in the wood-work, as was also on parallel lines the door leading into the dining-room. At this moment a slight shiver, comparable to the sensation caused by an electric spark, stirred the woman sitting in the

28 The Tragedy of a Genius

easy chair ; but likewise the sweetest smile lit up her lips and her face, moved by the expecting of a pleasure, shone like that of a beautiful Italian madonna ; she suddenly found the strength to bury her terrors in the depths of her soul ; then she turned her head towards the panels of the door which was about to open at the corner of the parlour, and which was indeed so roughly pushed that the poor creature seemed to have received herself its rough treatment.

Balthazar Claes suddenly showed himself, advanced a few steps, did not look at the woman, or if he looked did not see her, and remained upright in the middle of the parlour leaning his slightly bent head on his right hand. A horrible suffering to which the woman could not accustom herself, although it frequently returned every day, pressed on her heart, scattered her smile, brought out folds on her forehead between the eyebrows, near that line which is hollowed out by the frequent expression of extreme feelings ; her eyes filled with tears, but she wiped them suddenly as she gazed at Balthazar. It was impossible not to be profoundly impressed by the head of the Claes family.

When young he must have resembled the sublime martyr who threatened Charles V with a re-creation of Artevelde ; but at that instant he seemed more than sixty, although he was about fifty ; the premature old age had destroyed the noble likeness. His tall figure was slightly bent.

The Tragedy of a Genius 29

whether his work obliged him to bend, or his spine had become rounded by the weight of his head. His chest was broad, his bust square ; but the lower parts of his body were frail, though sinewy ; and this disaccord in an organisation evidently once perfect intrigued the mind, which tried to explain the reasons for the fantastic form by some singularity of existence. His abundant light hair, little tended, fell in German fashion on his shoulders, but in a disorder which harmonised with the general bizarreness of his person. His broad forehead showed bumps in which Gall has placed the poetic worlds. His eyes, of a bright, rich blue, had the brusque vivacity which has been observed in the great searchers after occult causes. His nose, once no doubt perfect, had lengthened, and his nostrils seemed to open gradually more and more by an involuntary tension of the olfactory muscles. The hairy cheekbones were very prominent, his already sunken cheeks seemed all the hollower for it ; his mouth, full of grace, was compressed between the nose and a short, suddenly upturned chin.

The shape of his face was rather long than oval ; and the scientific system which assigns to every human visage a likeness to the face of an animal would have found an additional proof in that of Balthazar Claes, which might have been compared to a horse's head. The skin was glued to his bones, as if some secret fire had incessantly parched him ; then when at moments he looked into space as if

30 The Tragedy of a Genius

to find there the realisation of his hopes, you would have said he was shooting through his nostrils the flame that was devouring his soul. The profound sentiments that animate great men breathed in that pale face deeply furrowed by wrinkles, on that forehead furrowed like that of an old king full of cares, but particularly in the glittering eyes whose fire seemed equally fanned by the chastity bestowed by the tyranny of ideas, and by the inward hearth of a vast intelligence. The eyes, deep-sunk in their sockets, appeared to have been hollowed solely by the vigils and by the terrible reactions of a hope always deceived, always re-born.

The jealous fanaticism inspired by art or science also betrayed itself in this man by a singular and constant absent-mindedness to which his dress and demeanour bore witness, in accord with the magnificent monstrosity of his physiognomy. His broad hairy hands were dirty, his long nails had very dark black lines at their extremities. His boots were either not cleaned or lacked laces. In the whole house the master alone might give himself the strange licence of being so dirty. His black cloth trousers full of spots, his unbuttoned waistcoat, his cravat put on awry and his greenish coat which was always open at the seams completed a fantastic ensemble of small and great things which, in any other man, would have betrayed the poverty produced by vices, but which, in Balthazar Claes, was the *négligé* of genius. Vice

The Tragedy of a Genius 31

and genius too often produce similar results, by which the vulgar are deceived. Is not genius a continual excess which devours time, money, the body, and leads to the hospital even more rapidly than evil passions? Men seem even to have more respect for vices than for genius, for they refuse to give it credit. It appears that the benefits derived from the secret working of a savant are so remote that the social state is afraid to reckon with him whilst living; it prefers to acquit itself by not forgiving him either his poverty or his misfortunes.

Despite his continual forgetfulness of the present, if Balthazar Claes abandoned his mysterious ponderings, if some gentle, sociable intention again lit up that thinking face, if his fixed eyes lost their rigid brilliance in order perchance to depict a feeling, if he looked around him on returning to real life, it was difficult not to render involuntary homage to the seductive beauty of his face, to the gracious spirit which was there revealed. So everybody seeing him at such times regretted that that man no longer belonged to the world, saying: "He must have been very handsome in his youth!" Vulgar error! Balthazar Claes had never been more poetic than now. Lavater would certainly have liked to study the head, full of patience, of Flemish loyalty, of frank morality, where everything was broad and great, where passion seemed calm because it was strong. His conduct was bound to be pure, his word was

32 The Tragedy of a Genius

sacred, his friendship seemed constant, his devotion would have been complete ; but the will that employs such qualities for the profit of a country, of the world or a family, had received a fatally different direction.

This citizen, in duty bound to watch over the happiness of a household, to manage a fortune, to secure a fine future for his children, lived outside his duties and his affections in commerce with some familiar spirit. To a priest he would have seemed full of God's word, an artist would have saluted him as a great master, an enthusiast would have taken him for a seer of the Swedenborgian Church.

At this moment his ragged, neglected, ruined dress contrasted strangely with the graceful elegance of the woman who admired him with such grief. Deformed persons endowed with minds or a beautiful soul bring an exquisite taste to bear on their toilette. They either dress simply, understanding that their charm is entirely moral, or they know how to make the ugliness of their proportions forgotten by a sort of elegance in details which diverts the looks and occupies the mind. Not only had this woman a generous soul, but further, she loved Balthazar Claes with the woman's instinct that gives a foretaste of angels' intelligence. Brought up in one of the most illustrious families of Belgium, she would have acquired taste had she not got it already ; but, enlightened by the wish to constantly please the

The Tragedy of a Genius 33

man she loved, she knew how to dress admirably without her elegance being disparate with her two faults of conformation. Her corsage only sinned at the shoulders, the one being perceptibly higher than the other.

She looked through the windows into the interior court, then into the garden, as if to see if she was alone with Balthazar, and said to him in a gentle voice, casting him a look full of the submissiveness which distinguishes Flemish women, for love had long dispelled from between them the pride of Spanish grandeeship :

"Balthazar, are you very busy? This is the thirty-third Sunday you have not come to Mass or Vespers."

Claes did not reply ; his wife lowered her head, joined her hands and waited : she knew his silence did not mean contempt or disdain, but tyrannical preoccupations. Balthazar was one of those beings who keep their youthful delicacy a long time in the depths of the heart, he would have thought himself a criminal had he expressed the least thought wounding to a woman overwhelmed by the sentiment of her physical deformity. Perhaps he alone among men knew that a word, a look, may efface years of happiness, and all the more cruel because they contrast the more violently with a constant sweetness ; for our nature leads us to feel more pain from a dissonance in felicity, than we experience pleasure from a joy encountered in misfortune. A few instants later Balthazar

34 The Tragedy of a Genius

seemed to wake up, looked keenly about him and said :

" Vespers ?—Ah ! So the children are at Vespers ? "

He advanced a few paces to look into the garden, where magnificent tulips were everywhere blooming ; but he suddenly stopped as if he had knocked up against a wall and cried :

" Why should they not combine in a given time ? "

" Is he going mad ? " said his wife to herself in utter fright.

In order to give more interest to the scene provoked by this situation, it is indispensable to glance at Balthazar Claes's former life and that of the granddaughter of the Duke de Casa-Réal.

About 1783 M. Balthazar Claes-Molina de Nourho, then twenty-two, was what we call in France a handsome man. He came to Paris to finish his education, where he learnt excellent society manners from Madame d'Egmont, Count de Horn, Prince d'Arenberg, the Spanish Ambassador, Helvetius, Frenchmen of Belgian origin, or persons who had come thence, whom their birth or wealth caused to be reckoned among the *grands seigneurs* who gave the tone at that period. Young Claes met with some relations and friends who launched him into the great world at the moment when that great world was about to fall ; but like most young men he was at first more

The Tragedy of a Genius 35

attracted by glory and science than by vanity. He therefore frequented the savants a good deal and particularly Lavoisier, who then 'was more recommended to public attention by the immense fortune of a farmer-general than by his discoveries in chemistry ; whereas later on the great chemist was fated to make the little farmer-general forgotten. Balthazar became an enthusiast for the science cultivated by Lavoisier and became his most ardent disciple ; but he was young, as handsome as Helvetius, and the women of Paris soon taught him to distil exclusively wit and love. Although he had embraced study with ardour, and Lavoisier had accorded him some praise, he abandoned his master to listen to the mistresses of taste with whom the young men took their last society lessons and fashioned themselves after the usages of high society, which in Europe forms a single family.

The intoxicating dream of success lasted but a short time ; after breathing the air of Paris Balthazar went away wearied of a hollow life which suited neither his ardent soul nor his loving heart. Domestic life, so gentle, so calm, which the mere name of Flanders brought to his memory, seemed to him but to suit his character and the ambitions of his heart. No Parisian *salon* with its gilding had effaced the melodies of the brown parlour and of the little garden where his childhood was spent so happily. A man must have neither home nor country in order to remain

36 The Tragedy of a Genius

in Paris. It is the town of the cosmopolite or of men who have espoused the world and embrace it incessantly with the arm of science, art or power.

III

THE child of Flanders returned to Douai like La Fontaine's pigeon to its nest, he wept with joy as he entered it on the day of the festival of Gayant. Gayant, that superstitious happiness of the whole town, that triumph of Flemish memories, had been introduced at the time of the emigration of his family to Douai.

His father's and mother's death left Claes House deserted and occupied him there for some time. When his first grief was over he felt the need of marrying to complete a happy existence; he wanted to follow his ancestors and look for a wife at Ghent or Bruges or Anvers; but none of the persons he met there suited him. He had no doubt some particular ideas about marriage, for he had been reproached since a youth with not walking in the common rut.

One day at one of his Ghent relations' he heard about a young lady from Brussels who became the subject of rather lively discussion. Some thought Mlle de Temninck's beauty was destroyed by its imperfections; others saw her perfect in spite of her defects. Balthazar Claes's old cousin said to his guests that beautiful or not she had a soul that would bring him to marry her, if he were still

38 The Tragedy of a Genius

marriageable; and he told how she had just given up her father's and mother's bequests in order to procure for her young brother a marriage worthy of his name, thus preferring her brother's happiness to her own and sacrificing her whole life to him. It was not credible that Mlle de Temninck would marry when old and fortuneless, when as a young heiress she received no proposals.

Some days after, Balthazar Claes visited Mlle de Temninck, then twenty-five, with whom he had become violently smitten. Joséphine de Temninck regarded herself as the object of a caprice and refused to listen to M. Claes; but passion is so communicative, and for a poor deformed, limping girl a love inspired in a young, well-looking man possesses such attractions that she consented to let herself be courted.

Would not an entire volume be needed to properly depict the love of a young girl humbly submissive to the opinion that proclaims her ugly, whilst she feels in herself the irresistible charm produced by true feelings? There would be ferocious jealousies at the aspect of happiness, cruel hunger for revenge on a rival who steals a look, in fact, emotions, terrors unknown to the generality of women, which would therefore lose by being merely indicated. Doubt, so dramatic in love, would be the secret of that essentially minute analysis, in which certain souls would rediscover the lost but not forgotten poetry of their first troubles; those sublime exaltations at the bottom of the heart

The Tragedy of a Genius 39

which the countenance never betrays ; that fear of not being understood and those limitless joys at having been so ; those hesitations of the soul which goes back upon itself and those magnetic projections which give the eyes infinite shades ; those projects of suicide caused by a word and dissipated by an intonation of voice as prolonged as the feeling whose misunderstood persistence it reveals ; those trembling looks which veil terrible boldnesses ; those sudden desires to speak and act repressed even by their own violence ; that intimate eloquence produced by phrases without wit, but uttered in an agitated voice ; the mysterious effects of that primitive shamefacedness of the soul and of that divine discretion which makes people generous in the dark and finds an exquisite taste in ignored devotion ; in a word, all the beauties of your love and the weaknesses of its power.

Mlle Joséphine de Temninck was a coquette through greatness of soul. The feeling of her apparent imperfections made her as difficult as the most beautiful person would have been. The fear of displeasing one day awakened her pride, destroyed her self-confidence and gave her the courage to keep in her heart's depths those first felicities which other women like to publish by their manners and of which they make themselves a proud adornment. The more love drove her to Balthazar, the less did she venture to express her sentiments to him. Gesture, look, answer or

40 The Tragedy of a Genius

inquiry, which in a pretty woman are flatteries for a man, became in her humiliating speculations. A beautiful woman can be herself at her ease, the world always makes allowances for a foolishness or clumsiness; whilst a single look stays the most splendid expression on an ugly woman's lips, intimidates her eyes, increases the ungracefulness of her gestures, embarrasses her attitude. Does she not know that she alone is forbidden to make faults? everyone denies her the boon of retrieving them, and, besides, nobody gives her the opportunity.

Must not the necessity of being perfect every instant extinguish the faculties, freeze the exercise of them? Such a woman can only live in an atmosphere of angelic indulgence. Where are the hearts from which indulgence blossoms forth without being tainted by a bitter, wounding pity? These thoughts to which the horrible politeness of society had accustomed her, and that considerateness, more cruel than insult, which aggravates misfortunes by confirming them, oppressed Mlle de Temninck, caused her a constant embarrassment which drove the most delightful impressions into the depths of her soul and struck a chill into her attitude, her speech, her looks. She was in love surreptitiously, only dared to have eloquence or beauty in solitude.

Daylight did not suit her, she would have been ravishing if she had been allowed to live at night only. Often, in order to test this love and at the

The Tragedy of a Genius 41

risk of losing it, she disdained the adornments which might partly conceal her defects. Her Spanish eyes were fascinating when she found Balthazar thought her beautiful *en négligé*. Still, mistrust spoilt for her the rare moments during which she ventured to abandon herself to happiness. She soon asked herself if Claes did not want to marry her in order to have a slave in his house, if he had not some secret imperfections which obliged him to put up with a poor deformed girl. These perpetual anxieties lent sometimes an incredible value to the hours when she believed in the duration, in the sincerity of a love that was to avenge her on the world.

She provoked delicate discussions by exaggerating her ugliness, so as to get to the bottom of her lover's conscience, she then got from Balthazar truths with little flattery in them ; but she liked his embarrassment when she had brought him to say that what one loved above all in a woman was a beautiful soul, and that devotion which makes the days of life so constantly happy that after some years of marriage the most delicious woman on earth is for a husband equivalent to the plainest. After piling up what truths there were in the paradoxes which tend to diminish beauty's value, Balthazar suddenly perceived the discourtesy of his proposition, and discovered the whole goodness of his heart in the delicacy of the transition by which he knew how to prove to Mlle de Temninck that she was perfect for him.

42 The Tragedy of a Genius

Devotion, which is perhaps in woman the summit of love, was not wanting to her, for she always despaired of being loved ; but the prospect of a struggle in which feeling would be victorious over beauty tempted her ; then she found some greatness in giving herself without believing in the love ; lastly, happiness, however brief it might be, was bound to cost her too dear for her to refuse to taste it. These uncertainties, these combats, communicating the charm and unforeseenness of passion to this superior creature, inspired in Balthazar an almost chivalrous love.

The marriage took place at the beginning of 1795. The married pair went to Douai to spend the first days of their union in the patriarchal house of the Claes, where treasures were increased by Mlle de Temninck, who brought with her some fine pictures by Murillo and Velasquez, her mother's diamonds and the magnificent presents sent by her brother, now Duke de Casa-Réal. Few women were happier than Mme Claes. Her happiness lasted fifteen years without the least cloud ; and it infused itself like a bright light into the smallest details of existence.

Most men have inequalities of character, which produces continual discords ; they thus deprive their home of harmony, the ideal of a household ; for most men are spoilt with pettinesses, and pettinesses give rise to disturbances. The one is honest and active, but hard and crabbed ; another is good but pig-headed ; this man loves his wife,

The Tragedy of a Genius 43

but is uncertain in his wishes ; that one busy with his ambition acquits himself of his feelings as of a debt ; if he bestows the vanities of fortune, he takes away the joy of every day ; in fine, the men, in their social environment are essentially incomplete, without being notably reproachable.

People of talent are as variable as barometers, genius alone is essentially kind. So pure happiness is found at the two extremities of the moral scale. A good animal or a man of genius are alone capable, the one through weakness, the other through strength, of the equableness of temper, of the constant sweetness in which melts the bitterness of life. With the one it is indifference and passivity ; with the other it is indulgence and continuity of the lofty thought of which he is the interpreter and which must resemble itself in principle as in application. One and the other are equally simple and naive ; only, with the one it is a vacuum ; with the other, depth.

So clever women are very apt to take an animal as the best alternative to a great man. So Balthazar at first carries his superiority into the smallest things of life. It pleased him to see in conjugal love a magnificent work, and like men of high reach who do not suffer anything imperfect he wanted to develop all its beauties. His mind incessantly modified the calm of happiness, his noble character marked his every attention to his wife.

Accordingly, although he showed the philosophic

44 The Tragedy of a Genius

principles of the eighteenth century, he established a Catholic priest in his house up to 1801, in spite of dangers arising from the revolutionary laws, in order not to run counter to the Spanish fanaticism for Roman Catholicism which his wife had sucked in with her mother's milk ; then when the worship was restored in France he escorted his wife to church every Sunday. His attachment never quitted the forms of passion. He never made his wife feel within her the protective strength women like so much, because in her case it would have savoured of pity. In fact, by the most adroit adulation he treated her as an equal and allowed himself the luxury of those sulkinesses which a man permits himself in the case of a beautiful woman as if to brave her superiority thereby. His lips were ever embellished by a smile of happiness, and his speech was constantly full of gentleness. He loved his Joséphine for herself and for himself, with the ardour which connotes a continual eulogy of a woman's qualities and beauties.

Fidelity often the result of a social principle, of a religion or of calculation among husbands, seemed in him involuntary and was accompanied by the sweet flatteries of love's springtide. Duty was the only obligation of marriage unknown to those equally loving beings, for Balthazar Claes found in Mlle de Temninck a constant and complete realisation of his hopes. In him the heart was always satiated without weariness and the man

The Tragedy of a Genius 45

ever happy. Not only did her Spanish blood not leave the Casa-Réals' granddaughter in the lurch and endow her with an instinct of the science which knows how to vary pleasure infinitely, but she had also the limitless devotion which is the genius of her sex, as grace in all its beauty. Her love was a blind fanaticism which at a mere nod of the head would have made her go joyously to death. Balthazar's delicacy had uplifted in her a woman's most generous sentiments and inspired her with an imperious need to give more than she received. The mutual exchange of an alternately lavished happiness visibly placed the principle of her life outside herself, and spread around an increasing love in speech, looks, deeds. On either side gratitude enriched and varied the life of the heart ; just as the certainty of being all in all to each other excluded pettinesses by aggrandising the smallest accessories of existence. But in addition, is not the deformed wife whom her husband thinks all right, the crippled woman whom a man does not wish otherwise, or the aged woman who seems to him young, the happiest creature in the feminine world ? Human passion could not go beyond that.

Is it not woman's glory to make adored what seems a defect in her ? To forget that a cripple does not walk straight is the fascination of a moment ; but to love her because she limps is the deification of her defect. Perhaps the sentence might be engraved in the gospel of women :

46 The Tragedy of a Genius

“Happy are the imperfect women, to them belongs the kingdom of love.” Truly beauty is bound to be a misfortune for a woman, for that passing flower counts too much in the feeling it inspires. Does one not love it just as one marries a rich heiress? But the love which a woman, deprived of the frail advantages after which the sons of Adam run, makes a man feel or herself testifies is the true love, the truly mysterious passion, an ardent embrace of the souls, a sentiment for which the day of disenchantment never arrives. Such a woman has graces unknown by the world, from whose control she withdraws, she is beautiful at the proper time and wins too much glory in making her imperfections forgotten not to be constantly successful at it.

Thus the most famous attachments in history were almost all inspired by women in whom the vulgar would have found defects. Cleopatra, Jeanne of Naples, Diane de Poitiers, Mlle de la Vallière, Mme de Pompadour, in fine, the majority of women whom love has made celebrated were not wanting either in imperfections or infirmities; whilst most women whose beauty is cited to us as perfect have had an unhappy ending to their lives. The apparent bizarreness of this must have a cause. Perhaps man lives more by sentiment than by pleasure? perhaps the entirely physical charm of a lovely woman has limits, whilst the essentially moral charm of a woman of moderate beauty is infinite? Is it not the moral of the fable

The Tragedy of a Genius 47

on which rests the *Arabian Nights*? A plain woman as wife of Henry VIII would have defied the axe and endured her master's fickleness.

By a strange accident readily intelligible in a girl of Spanish origin Mme Claes was ignorant. She knew how to read and write ; but up to twenty, the age at which her parents withdrew her from the convent, she had only read ascetic works. On entering society she hankered after society pleasures and learnt only the futile sciences of dress ; but she was so deeply humbled by her ignorance that she did not dare to engage in any conversation ; accordingly, she passed for having little wits. However, this mystical education had had as a result to leave the sentiments in her in all their force and not to spoil her natural mind. Foolish and plain as an heiress in society eyes, she became witty and lovely for her husband. Balthazar certainly tried during the first years of marriage to give his wife the knowledge she needed for comfort in the world ; but he was doubtless too late, she possessed only the memory of the heart. Joséphine forgot nothing Claes told her, relating to themselves ; she remembered the slightest incidents of her happy life and forgot on the morrow her lesson of the evening before.

Such ignorance would have caused much discord between other spouses ; but Mme Claes had so naive an understanding of passion, she loved her husband so piously, so sacredly, and the desire of keeping her happiness made her so astute, that she

48 The Tragedy of a Genius

always put on the look of seeming to understand him, and seldom let moments come when her ignorance would have been too evident. Moreover, when two people love each other so much that every day is to them the first of their passion, there are phenomena in such abundant happiness that alter all life's conditions. Is it not then, like childhood, indifferent to all that is not laughter, joy, pleasure? Then when life is very active, when the hearths are glowing with it, a man gives free rein to the burning without thinking or discussing about it, without measuring means or end. Besides, no daughter of Eve ever understood woman's business better than Mme Claes. She had a Flemish woman's submissiveness which makes the domestic hearth so attractive, and to which her Spanish pride imparted a higher savour. She was imposing, knew how to command respect by a glance, in which the feeling of her worth and nobility blazed out; but she trembled in Claes's presence; and at length she had ended by placing him so high and so near God, by referring to him all the acts of her life and her least thoughts, that her love was united with a tinge of respectful fear which sharpened it yet more.

She assumed with pride all the habits of the Flemish burgessry, and made it a point of self-love to make her domestic life richly happy, to keep the smallest details in the house in their classic cleanliness, to possess only perfectly good things, to have served on the table the most delicate dishes and

The Tragedy of a Genius 49

to put everything in the house in harmony with the life of the heart.

They had two boys and two girls. The eldest, a girl, Marguérite, was born in 1796. The last child was a boy of three, Jean-Balthazar by name. The maternal sentiment in Mme Claes was almost equal to her love for her husband. Accordingly her soul, especially during the last days of her life, was the arena of a horrible fight between those two equally powerful feelings, one of which had become in some sort the enemy of the other. The tears and terror impressed on her face at the moment when the story of the domestic drama looming over this powerful house begins were caused by the fear of having sacrificed her children to her husband.

IV

IN 1805 Mme Claes's brother died childless. Spanish law opposed his sister's succession to the territorial possessions, which were an appanage of the family titles ; but by his testamentary arrangements the Duke bequeathed her about sixty thousand ducats, which the heirs of the collateral branch did not dispute. Although the feeling that united her to Balthazar Claes was such that no notion of self-interest had ever stained it, Joséphine felt a sort of content in possessing a fortune equal to her husband's, and was happy to be able in her turn to offer him something after having so nobly received everything from him. So hazard willed it that this marriage in which calculators saw a folly was an excellent one from the standpoint of interest.

The use of the money was difficult to decide. Claes House was so rich in furniture, pictures, objects of art and rarity, that it hardly seemed possible to add to it things worthy of those already there. The taste of the family had accumulated treasures. One generation had been on the track of fine pictures ; then the need of completing the collection begun had made the taste for paintings hereditary. The hundred pictures adorning the

The Tragedy of a Genius 51

gallery by which there was communication between the rear quarters and the reception-rooms on the first floor of the front house, as well as fifty other pictures in the showrooms, had required three centuries of patient collection. There were famous canvases by Rubens, Ruysdael, Van Dyck, Terburg, Gérard Dow, Téniers, Mieris, Paul Potter, Wouvermans, Rembrandt, Hobbema, Cranach and Holbein. There were fewer Italian and French pictures, but all authentic and of the best.

Another generation had had a leaning towards services of Japanese or Chinese porcelain. One Claes was enamoured of furniture, another of silver-plate ; in a word, each had had his mania, his passion, one of the most prominent traits of the Flemish character. Balthazar's father, the last of the renowned Dutch company, had left one of the richest known collections of tulips. Besides these hereditary riches which represented an enormous capital and splendidly furnished the old mansion, simple outside as a shell, but, like a shell, nacreous and adorned with the richest colours inside, Balthazar Claes possessed also a country house in the plain of Orchies. Far from basing, like the French, his expenses on his income, he had followed the old Dutch custom of not spending more than a quarter of it ; and twelve hundred ducats a year set his expenses on a level with those of the wealthiest persons in the town. The publication of the Civil Code justified this wisdom. By ordering the equal partition of property,

52 The Tragedy of a Genius

the legacy law was bound to leave each child almost poor and to disperse one day the riches of the old Claes museum. Balthazar in agreement with Mme Claes disposed the fortune of his wife in such a way as to give each of their children a position similar to their father's.

So Claes House persisted in the modesty of its ways and bought woods which, though they had suffered a bit in the wars, yet in ten years' time by good management were sure to have an enormous value.

The high society of Douai frequented by M. Claes had known so well how to appreciate his wife's fine character and qualities, that by a kind of tacit convention she was exempt from the duties by which provincial people hold so much. During the winter season which she spent in the town she seldom went in society, and society came to her. She received every Wednesday and gave three big dinners a month. Everyone had felt that she was more at ease at home, where she was moreover detained by her passion for her husband and the care of her children's education. Such was until 1809 the conduct of the household which had nothing in conformity with received ideas. The life of those two beings secretly full of love and joy was outwardly similar to any other. Balthazar Claes's passion for his wife which was able to make it lasting seemed, as he remarked himself, to employ his innate constancy in the cultivation of happiness, which was well worth that of

The Tragedy of a Genius 53

the tulips towards which he had bent since childhood, and freed him from having a mania, like each of his ancestors before him.

At the end of the year Balthazar's mind and manners underwent disastrous changes, which began so naturally that Mme Claes at first did not think it needful to ask him the reason. One night her husband went to bed in a state of preoccupation which she made it her duty to respect. Her womanly delicacy and habits of submission had always caused her to await Balthazar's confidences, her trust in him being warranted by so true an affection that it gave no loophole for jealousy. Although certain of getting an answer when she permitted herself an inquisitive question she had ever kept the fear of refusal from her first impressions in life. Besides, her husband's moral malady had phases, and only reached by progressively stronger strides the intolerable violence that destroyed her home happiness.

However occupied Balthazar was he still remained several months talkative and affectionate, and the change in his character only showed itself then by frequent absent-mindedness. Mme Claes hoped for a long time to get to know through her husband the secret of his labours; perhaps he did not want to confess to it except when there were useful results, because many men cherish a pride which drives them to hide their struggles and only show themselves as victors. On the day of triumph the home happiness would therefore

54 The Tragedy of a Genius

return with all the more brilliancy because Balthazar would perceive the gap in his life of love which his heart would doubtless disavow.

Joséphine knew her husband well enough to know he would never forgive himself for having rendered his Pépita less happy for several months. She therefore kept silent, feeling a kind of joy at suffering through him, for him, for her passion had a tinge of that Spanish piety which never separates faith from love and does not understand feeling without sufferings. She waited for a return of affection, saying to herself daily : " It will be to-morrow ! " and treating her happiness like an absent person. She conceived her last child amid these secret troubles. Horrible revelation of a future of pain ! Under these circumstances love was among her husband's distractions, like a distraction stronger than the others. Her pride as a woman, hurt for the first time, caused her to sound the depth of the unknown abyss which separated her for ever from the Claes of early days. From that moment Balthazar's state grew worse. That man, who only recently was continually engaged in domestic delights, who would play for whole hours with his children, who would roll with them on the parlour carpet or in the garden alleys, who seemed unable to live except under Pépita's black eyes, did not notice his wife's pregnancy, forgot to live with his family and forgot even himself.

The longer Mme Claes had delayed asking him the object of his occupations, the less she dared.

The Tragedy of a Genius 55

At the idea her blood boiled and her voice failed her. At last she believed she had ceased pleasing her husband, and was then seriously alarmed. The fear worried her, made her desperate, exalted her, became the beginning of many sad hours and melancholy reveries. She justified Balthazar at her expense, thinking herself old and ugly ; she then divined a thought which was generous but humiliating for her in the work by which he made himself a negative fidelity, and wanted to give him back his independence by allowing one of those secret divorces to be established, the expression of happiness which several households seem to enjoy.

Still, before bidding farewell to conjugal life, she tried to read to the bottom of his heart, but she found it closed. By degrees she saw Balthazar become indifferent to all he had loved, neglect his flowering tulips, and think no more of his children. Beyond doubt he was yielding to some passion outside the heart affections, which according to women none the less dries up the heart. Love was asleep and not in flight. If it was a consolation, the misfortune none the less remained the same. The continuousness of the crisis is explained by a simple word, hope, the secret of all conjugal situations.

When the poor woman reached a degree of despair that gave her courage to question her husband, she then precisely found again sweet moments, during which Balthazar proved to her

56 The Tragedy of a Genius

that if he was part and parcel of some diabolical ideas they allowed him at times to become himself again. During such instants when her sky brightened up she was too eager to enjoy her happiness to trouble him with importunities ; then when she had emboldened herself to question Balthazar, at the very moment she was about to speak he suddenly left her, or fell into the gulf of his contemplations, whence nothing could draw him.

The reaction of the moral on the physical soon began its ravages, at first imperceptible, but still visible to the eye of a loving woman who followed her husband's secret thought in its least manifestations. She had often difficulty in restraining her tears when she saw him after dinner plunged in an easy chair at the corner of the fireplace, mournful and pensive, his eye fixed on a black panel without noticing the silence around him. She observed with terror the insensible changes that degraded the face which love had made sublime for her ; every day the life of his soul withdrew more and more, and there was no expression in him. Sometimes his eyes took a glassy colour, it seemed as if his sight was turned back and using itself inwardly.

When the children had gone to bed after some hours of silence and solitude, full of frightful thoughts, if poor P  pita ventured sometimes to ask : " My friend, are you suffering ? " Balthazar did not reply ; or if he replied he returned to

The Tragedy of a Genius 57

consciousness with a start like a man awaking abruptly from slumber, and uttered a dry, hollow "No," which fell heavily on the heart of his quivering wife.

Although she had wanted to conceal from her friends her strange situation, she was yet obliged to speak of it. After the habit of small towns most of the *salons* had made Balthazar's derangement the subject of conversation, and in certain circles several details unknown by Mme Claes were already familiar. Accordingly, in spite of the dumbness commanded by courtesy, some friends showed such lively anxiety that she hastened to justify her husband's singularities: "M. Balthazar," she said, "had undertaken a great work which absorbed him, but the success of which was to be a subject of glory for his family and his country." This mysterious explanation was too flattering to the ambition of a town, where more than in any other love of country and desire for its renown predominate, for it not to produce a reaction favourable to M. Claes.

His wife's suppositions were well founded up to a certain point. Several workmen of different trades had worked a long time in the attic of the front house where Balthazar retired in the morning. After making retreats of longer and longer duration, to which his wife and people imperceptibly accustomed themselves, Balthazar wound up by stopping away for whole days. But (unspeakable pain!) Mme Claes heard through the humiliating

58 The Tragedy of a Genius

confidences of her good friends, astounded by her ignorance, that her husband kept on buying in Paris physical instruments, precious substances, books, machines, and was ruining himself, so they said, in searching for the philosopher's stone. She must think of her children, added her friends, her own future, and it would be criminal of her not to use her influence to turn aside her husband from the false path in which he was entangled.

Though Mme Claes used her impertinence as a *grande dame* to impose silence on such absurd talk, she was seized with fright despite her apparent assurance, and resolved to abandon her rôle of self-sacrifice. She occasioned one of those situations during which a woman is on a footing of equality with her husband; and so with fewer tremors she dared to ask Balthazar the reason for his change and the motive of his constant retirement. The Fleming knitted his brows and then answered:

"My dear, you wouldn't understand."

One day Joséphine insisted on knowing the secret, complaining gently at not sharing the whole thought of one whose life she shared.

"As it interests you so much," replied Balthazar, keeping his wife on his knees and fondling her black hair, "I'll tell you. I've gone back to chemistry and I am the happiest man in the world."

Two years after the winter in which M. Claes had become a chemist his house had changed in

The Tragedy of a Genius 59

appearance. Whether society was shocked at the savant's perpetual distraction or feared to embarrass him, or whether her secret worries had made Mme Claes less agreeable, she only saw now her intimates. Balthazar went nowhere, shut himself in his laboratory the whole day, remained there sometimes for the night, and only appeared in the bosom of the family at dinner-hour. From the second year he ceased staying in the country during the fine season, and his wife did not want to live there alone.

Balthazar sometimes went out, took a walk, and only returned next day, leaving Mme Claes for a whole night a prey to deadly anxiety ; after making a vain search for him in a town where gates were shut at night, after the custom of fortresses, she was unable to send into the country after him. The unfortunate lady then had not even the hope blended with anguish which waiting gives, and suffered till next day ; Balthazar, who had forgotten the time of the gates being closed, returned quite quietly next day without suspecting the tortures which his absent-mindedness must needs cause his family ; and the happiness of seeing him again was for his wife as dangerous a crisis as her fears could be ; she kept silent, did not dare to question him, for, at the first question she put, he had answered in surprise :

“ Well ! Surely one can take a walk ! ”

The passions cannot deceive. Mme Claes's anxieties justified the rumours she had been pleased

60 The Tragedy of a Genius

to deny. Her youth had inured her to know the world's polite pity ; in order not to undergo it a second time she shut herself more closely within the house which everyone deserted, even her last friends. The disorderliness of his dress, always so degrading for a man of high class, became such with Balthazar that among so many causes of chagrin it was not one of the less sensible by which his wife was affected, used as she was to the exquisite cleanness of the Flemish women. In concert with Lemulquinier, her husband's valet, Joséphine repaired for some time the daily devastation of the clothes, but they had to give it up. On the very day when, unknown to Balthazar, new clothes had been substituted for those which were stained, torn or holey, he made rags of them.

This woman, happy for fifteen years, whose jealousy had never been aroused, suddenly found herself to count apparently nothing in the heart where she was recently reigning. Spanish by origin, a Spanish woman's feeling growled in her when she discovered a rival in science which was carrying off her husband ; the torments of jealousy devoured her heart and renewed her love. But what to do against science ? How fight against its incessant, tyrannical and growing power ? How kill an invisible rival ? How can a woman whose power is limited by nature struggle against an idea whose enjoyments are boundless and the attractions ever fresh ? What to attempt against

The Tragedy of a Genius 61

the coquetry of ideas which freshen themselves, spring up again more beautiful in difficulties, and draw a man so far from the world that he forgets even his dearest affections ?

Finally, one day, despite Balthazar's severe orders his wife wished at least not to leave him, to shut herself up with him in the attic to which he withdrew, to fight hand to hand with her rival by helping her husband during the long hours he lavished on that awful mistress. She wanted to slip secretly into the mysterious workshop of seductiveness and win the right always to stay there. So she tried to share with Lemulquinier the right of entering the laboratory ; but in order that he might not be a witness of the quarrel she feared, she waited for a day when her husband would do without the valet. For some time she studied the servant's comings and goings with an impatience of hatred ; did he not know all she desired to learn, what her husband hid from her and what she did not dare ask him ? She found Lemulquinier more favoured than she—she, the wife !

V

SO she came trembling and almost happy ; but for the first time in her life she knew Balthazar's wrath ; hardly had she opened the door when he fell upon her, seized her, threw her roughly on to the staircase, where she nearly rolled from top to bottom.

"Thank God, you're alive !" cried Balthazar, picking her up.

A glass mask had broken loudly over Mme Claes, who saw her husband pale, livid, frightened

"My dear, I had forbidden you to come here," he said, sitting down on a step of the stairs like a man who had been knocked down. "The saints have preserved you from death. By what luck were my eyes fixed on the door? We nearly perished."

"I should then have been very happy," she said.

"My experiment has failed," Balthazar went on. "Only you can I forgive the grief caused me by this cruel miscalculation. I was just on the point perhaps of decomposing azote !—Go, return to your affairs."

Balthazar returned to the laboratory.

"I was just on the point perhaps of decomposing

The Tragedy of a Genius 63

azote !” said the poor woman to herself as she returned to her room, where she burst into tears.

The phrase was unintelligible to her. Men, accustomed by education to conceive everything, do not know what horribleness there is for a woman in not being able to grasp the thought of the one she loves. More forgiving than we are, these divine creatures do not tell us when the language of their souls remains uncomprehended ; they are afraid to make us feel the superiority of their sentiments, and accordingly hide their griefs with the more joy because they are silent about their misunderstood pleasures ; but more ambitious in love than we are, they want to marry more than a man’s heart, they also want all his thought. In Mme Claes’s case, to know nothing of the science in which her husband was busied engendered in her soul a wrath more violent than that caused by a rival’s beauty. A struggle between women leaves to her who loves most the advantage of loving better ; but this wrath betrayed an impotence and humbled all the feelings that help us to live.

Joséphine did not know ! There was now a situation for her in which her ignorance parted her from her husband. Finally (the last torture and the keenest), he was often between life and death, he ran risks, far from her and near her, without her sharing or knowing them ! It was like Hell, a moral prison without issue without

64 The Tragedy of a Genius

hope. Mme Claes wanted at least to know the attractions of this science, and set about secretly studying chemistry in books. The family was then as if cloistered.

Such were the successive transitions through which misfortune made Claes House to pass, before bringing it to a kind of civil death with which it is struck at the moment this tale begins.

This violent situation became complicated. Like all passionate women, Mme Claes was possessed of unheard-of disinterestedness. Those who veritably love know how little money counts by comparison with feelings. Nevertheless Joséphine heard not without cruel emotion that her husband owed three hundred thousand francs mortgaged on his properties. The authenticity of the contracts sanctioned the anxieties, rumours, conjectures of the town. Mme Claes, justly alarmed, was forced (she so proudly) to question her husband's notary, to communicate to him the secret of her griefs, or let him guess them; and finally to listen to the humiliating query:

"How is it M. Claes has not yet told you anything?"

Luckily Balthazar's notary was almost a relative, in this way: M. Claes's grandfather had espoused a Pierquin of Anvers, of the same family as the Pierquins of Douai. Since the marriage the latter, though strangers to the Claes, treated them as cousins.

M. Pierquin, a young man of twenty-six who

The Tragedy of a Genius 65

had just succeeded to his father's business, was the sole person who had access to Claes House. Mme Claes had for several months lived in so complete a solitude that the notary had to confirm to her the news of the disaster already known to the whole town. He told her that her husband probably owed considerable sums to the firm supplying him with chemicals. After inquiries about the fortune and standing of M. Claes, the firm welcomed all his orders and dispatched the goods without anxiety despite the big credits. Mme Claes charged Pierquin to ask for the invoice of the goods supplied. Two months later MM. Protez et Chiffreville, chemical manufacturers, sent it in; it came to one hundred thousand francs.

Mme Claes and Pierquin studied the invoice with growing surprise. Although many articles, expressed scientifically or commercially, were unintelligible to them they were frightened to notice in the bill portions of metals, diamonds of all kinds, but in small quantities. The total of the debt was readily explained by the multiplicity of the articles, by the precautions necessitated by the transport of certain substances or the dispatch of some precious machines, by the exorbitant price of several products only obtainable with difficulty, or rendered dear by scarcity, lastly by the value of the physical or chemical instruments manufactured according to M. Claes's instructions.

The notary had collected information about

66 The Tragedy of a Genius

Protez et Chiffreville in his cousin's interest, and these merchants' probity was bound to be reassuring as to the morality of their operations with M. Claes, to whom, moreover, they often communicated the results obtained by Paris chemists in order to spare him expense. Mme Claes begged the notary to keep from Douai society the nature of these acquisitions, which would have been set down as madness ; but Pierquin answered that already in order not to weaken the consideration enjoyed by Claes he had delayed to the last moment the notarial obligations which the importance of the sums confidently lent by his clients had finally necessitated. He unveiled the extent of the wound, saying to his cousin that if she could not find a way of preventing her husband from wasting his fortune so madly, in six months the patrimonial property would be mortgaged beyond its value. As for himself, he said, the remarks he had made to his cousin with the considerateness due to a man so rightly esteemed had not had the slightest influence. Balthazar had replied once for all he was working for his family's glory and fortune.

So in addition to all the heart-tortures which Mme Claes had endured for two years, each of which combined with the other and increased the pain of the moment by all the past pains, there came a fearful, incessant horror which made the future awful to her.

Women have presentiments the accuracy of

The Tragedy of a Genius 67

which is like a miracle. Why, as a rule, do they tremble more than they hope when the interests of life are in question? Why have they only faith in the great ideas of the religious future? Why do they guess so cleverly the catastrophes of fortune or the crises of our destinies? Perhaps the feeling that unites them to the man they love causes them wonderfully to weigh forces, estimate faculties, know tastes, passions, vices, virtues; the perpetual study of such causes in the presence of which they ever are, doubtless gives them the fatal power of seeing their effects in all the possible situations. What they see of the present enables them to judge of the future, thanks to the perfection of their nervous system, with natural skill, a nervous perfection that allows them to grasp the slenderest diagnostics of thought and feeling.

Everything in them vibrates in unison with great moral emotions. They either feel or see. Now, though separated from her husband since two years, Mme Claes forefelt the loss of her fortune. She had measured Balthazar's deliberate impetuosity, unalterable persistence; if he was truly seeking for gold, he was bound to throw his last bit of bread into the crucible with perfect insensibility. But what was he trying for? Up till then motherly feeling and wifely love had been so excellently compounded in her heart that her children, equally loved by her and her husband, had never been interposed between them. But

68 The Tragedy of a Genius

suddenly she was *more mother than wife*, although she was more often wife than mother. And yet, however inclined she might be to sacrifice her fortune and even her children to the happiness of him she had chosen, loved, worshipped, and for whom she was still the only woman in the world, the remorse caused by the weakness of her maternal love hurled her into horrible dilemmas.

Accordingly, as a woman she suffered in the heart; as a mother, in her children; and as a Christian, for all. She kept silent and confined the storms within her soul. Her husband, sole arbiter of the family fate, was the master to regulate its destiny to his pleasure, he was accountable only to God. Besides, could she reproach him with the use of his fortune after the unselfishness he had proved through ten years of marriage? Was she judge of his plans? But her conscience, in accord with feeling and the law, told her that parents were the trustees of wealth and had no right to alienate the material happiness of their children. In order not to have to solve such hard problems she preferred shutting her eyes, after the custom of people who refuse to see the abyss to the bottom of which they know they will be bound to roll.

During six months her husband had not provided for household expenses. She secretly got sold in Paris the rich *parures* of diamonds her brother had given her on her marriage-day, and introduced the strictest economy into the house.

The Tragedy of a Genius 69

She dismissed her children's governess and even Jean's nurse. The luxury of carriages was formerly unknown to the burgessry, who were at once so humble in their ways of life, so proud in their sentiments; so nothing had been provided in Claes House for this modern invention; Balthazar had to keep his stables and carriage in a house opposite; his occupations no longer permitted him to attend to that part of the household which essentially concerns men; Mme Claes abolished the burdensome expense of the equipages and the servants whom his isolation made useless, and despite the excellence of the reasons she did not try to colour her reforms by excuses. Up to the present, facts had belied her words and silence henceforth was most suitable.

The change in the Claes's life was not justifiable in a country where, as in Holland, a man who spends his whole income is held mad. Only, as her eldest daughter Marguerite was nearly sixteen, Joséphine seemed to want her to make a fine marriage and settle her in the world in a position becoming a girl allied to the Molinas, the Van Ostrom-Temnincks and the Casa-Réals.

A few days before that during which this story begins, the diamond-money was exhausted. The same day at three, whilst escorting her children to Vespers, Mme Claes had met Pierquin, who was coming to see her and accompanied her to Saint-Pierre, talking in low tones about the situation.

"Cousin," he said, "I could not, without failing

70 The Tragedy of a Genius

in the friendship attaching me to your family, hide from you the danger in which you stand and not ask you to talk over it with your husband. Who, if not you, can stop him on the edge of the abyss towards which you are going? The revenues of the mortgaged property do not suffice to pay the interest on the sums lent; so you are to-day without an income. If you cut the woods you possess it would be taking away from yourselves the only chance of salvation in the future. My cousin Balthazar is at this instant debtor of thirty thousand francs to the Paris firm of Protez et Chiffreville. What will you pay them with? on what will you live? and what will become of you if Claes goes on asking for reagents, glass-ware, Voltaic piles, and other gewgaws? Your whole fortune except the house and personal property has been dissipated in gas and coal. When the day before yesterday the question arose of mortgaging the house, d'you know what Claes's answer was? 'The Devil!' That is the first sign of reason he has shown for three years."

Mme Claes in her grief pressed Pierquin's arm, raised her eyes to heaven and said:

"Keep our secret!"

Despite her piety the poor woman, crushed by these words of lightning clearness, could not pray, she remained in her chair among her children, opened her prayer-book and did not turn over a leaf of it; she had fallen into a contemplation as absorbing as were her husband's meditations.

The Tragedy of a Genius 71

Spanish honour, Flemish probity resounded in her soul with a voice as powerful as that of an organ. Her children's ruin was consummated ! There must be no more hesitation between them and their father's honour. The necessity of an early combat between her and her husband frightened her ; he was in her eyes so great, so imposing, that the mere prospect of his anger agitated her as much as the idea of God's majesty. She was then about to abandon the constant submissiveness in which as a wife she had holily abided. Her children's interests would oblige her to oppose in his tastes a man she idolised. Would it not often be needful to drag him back to positive questions when he hovered in the high regions of science, to pull him violently from a smiling future and to plunge him into the most hideous things materiality presents to artists and great men ?

To her, Balthazar Claes was a giant of science, a man bursting with glory ; he could not have forgotten her but for the richest hopes ; he was, besides, of such profound good brains, she had heard him talk with such talent on all kinds of questions, that he must needs be sincere when he said he was working for his family's glory and fortune. His love for his wife and children was not only immense, it was infinite. These feelings of his could not have vanished, they had no doubt grown more powerful when reproduced in another form. She, so noble, so generous and so fearful, was about to make the word " money " and the

72 The Tragedy of a Genius

sound of "money" continually re-echo in the great man's ears! She was about to show him poverty's wounds, make him hear the cries of distress, when he would hear the melodious voices of renown! Perhaps Balthazar's affection for her would lessen? If she had not had children, she would courageously and with pleasure have embraced the new destiny her husband was preparing for her.

Women brought up in opulence quickly feel the void covered by material enjoyments, and when their heart, rather tired than spoilt, has caused them to find the happiness given by a constant exchange of true feelings they do not recoil at a mediocre existence if that existence suits the being by whom they know themselves beloved. Their ideas, their pleasures are subject to the caprices of that life outside their own; for them the only future to be dreaded is to lose that life. At that moment, therefore, her children separated Pépita from her true life, as much as Balthazar had been separated from her by science; so, when she had returned from Vespers and she had thrown herself into her easy chair, she sent away the children after asking them to be as silent as possible; she then sent to her husband to come and see her; but although Lemulquinier, his old valet, had urgently pressed Balthazar to leave the laboratory, he had stopped there. Mme Claes had therefore time to reflect. And she too remained dreamy, without paying attention to the time or the weather or

The Tragedy of a Genius 73

the light. The thought of owing thirty thousand francs and being unable to pay them reawakened past pains, added them to those of the present and the future. This mass of interests, ideas, sensations found her too weak, she cried.

When she saw Balthazar enter, whose face then seemed to her more terrible, more absorbed, wilder than ever; when he did not answer her she remained at first fascinated by the immobility of his blank, vacuous look, by all the devouring ideas distilled by that bald forehead. Under the blow of that impression she longed to die. When she had heard the careless voice expressing a scientific wish at the moment when her heart was crushed her courage returned; she resolved to struggle against the terrible power which had robbed her of a lover, which had deprived the children of a father, the family of a fortune, all of happiness. Still she could not repress her constant trepidation, for in all her life there had not occurred a scene so solemn. Did not this fearful moment virtually contain her future, and was not the past summed up entirely in it?

Weak or timid people, or those the liveliness of whose sensations increase every least difficulty in life, men who are seized by an involuntary trembling before the masters of their fate, can now all conceive the thousands of ideas that whirled around in this woman's head, and the feelings under whose weight her heart was compressed, when her husband made slowly for the

74 The Tragedy of a Genius

garden-gate. Most women know the anguishes of intimate deliberation against which Mme Claes struggled. Thus, even those whose heart has not yet been violently moved except to declare to their husband some excess of expense or debts incurred with the dressmaker, will understand how the heart-throbs are increased when a whole life is in question.

A beautiful woman shows grace in casting herself at her husband's feet, she finds resources in the poses of grief ; whilst the sentiment of her physical defects enhanced yet more Mme Claes's fears. So, when she saw Balthazar almost going out, her first movement was certainly to rush after him ; but a cruel thought stayed her, she was about to stand up against him ! Must she not appear ridiculous to a man who, being no longer subject to love's fascinations, could see straight ? Joséphine would willingly have lost all, fortune and children, rather than lessen her woman's power. She wanted to fend off every ill chance in so solemn an hour, and she called loudly :

“ Balthazar ! ”

VI

HE turned round mechanically and coughed ; but without heeding his wife he went and spat in one of those small square boxes placed at intervals along the wainscoting, as in all rooms in Holland and Belgium. This man who never thought of anyone never forgot the spittoon, so inveterate was the habit. To poor Joséphine, unable to account for such bizarreness, her husband's constant care of the furniture always caused unspeakable anguish ; but at that moment it was so violent it broke down her self-control, and made her cry out in a tone full of impatience in which all her wounded sentiments were expressed :

“ But, sir, I am talking to you ! ”

“ What does that mean ? ” answered Balthazar, turning round quickly and casting at his wife a look to which life returned and which was like a thunderbolt to her.

“ Forgive me, my dear——” she said, paling.

She wished to get up and give him her hand, but she fell back without strength to do so.

“ I am dying ! ” she said in a voice broken by sobs.

At the sight of it Balthazar, like all absent-

76 The Tragedy of a Genius

minded people, had a speedy reaction, and divined, as it were, the secret of the crisis ; he at once took Mme Claes in his arms, opened the door leading to the small antechamber, and so quickly crossed the old wooden staircase that, his wife's dress having caught in the banisters, a piece was torn away with a loud noise. In order to open it he kicked the door of the vestibule common to their rooms ; but he found his wife's room shut.

He placed Joséphine gently on a sofa, saying :
" Goodness ! Where's the key ? "

" Thank you, dear ! " said Mme Claes, opening her eyes. " This is the first time for a long time that I have felt myself so near your heart."

" Great goodness ! " cried Claes. " The key ! Here are the servants——"

Joséphine beckoned to him to take the key tied to a ribbon along her pocket. After opening the door Balthazar put his wife on a sofa, went out to prevent the frightened servants from coming up, ordering them to serve up dinner quickly, and came back hurriedly for his wife.

" What is the matter with you, my dear life ? " he said, sitting by her and taking her hand, which he kissed.

" But I am quite well again now," she replied.
" I no longer suffer ! Only I wish I had God's power, to place at your feet all the gold on earth."

" Why gold ? " he asked.

And he drew his wife to him, pressed her and kissed her again on the forehead.

The Tragedy of a Genius 77

"Don't you give me greater riches by loving me as you do, dear and precious creature?" he went on.

"Oh! my Balthazar, why should you not banish the anguish of all our lives, as you chase away with your voice the chagrin of my heart? At last, I see, you are still the same."

"Of what anguish are you speaking, my darling?"

"But we are ruined, my friend!"

"Ruined?" he repeated.

He began smiling, fondled his wife's hand whilst holding it in his own, and said in a gentle voice which had not been heard for a long time:

"But, my angel, to-morrow perhaps our wealth will be boundless. Yesterday whilst looking for far more important secrets I believe I found the means of crystallising carbon, the substance of the diamond—O, my dear wife, in a few days you will forgive me my distractedness! It seems I'm distracted at times. Didn't I treat you roughly just now? Be indulgent to a man who has never ceased thinking of you, whose labours are full of you, of us——"

"Enough, enough!" she cried; "we shall talk over all that this evening, my friend. I was suffering from too much grief; now I am suffering from too much pleasure."

She did not expect to see again that face lit up by a feeling for herself as tender as it once was,

78 The Tragedy of a Genius

to listen to that voice still as sweet as ever, and to find again all she believed she had lost.

"To-night," he replied. "Very good; we'll talk. If I become absorbed in any meditation, recall my promise to me. To-night I'm going to quit my calculations, my labours, and plunge into all the family joys, into the delights of the heart; for, Pépita, I have need of them, I am thirsty for them!"

"You will tell me what you are investigating, Balthazar?"

"But, my poor child, you wouldn't understand."

"You think so? Well, my friend, it's now nearly four months that I've been studying chemistry in order to be able to talk of it with you. I've read Fourcroy, Lavoisier, Chaptal, Nollet, Rouelle, Berthollet, Gay-Lussac, Spallanzani, Leuwenhoek, Galvani, Volta, in fact, all the books about the science you adore. So you can tell me your secrets."

"Oh! you're an angel!" cried Balthazar, falling at his wife's knees and shedding tears of affection that made her quiver; "we understand each other in everything!"

"Ah!" she said, "I'd throw myself into the hell-fire which kindles your furnaces to hear that word from your mouth and to see you thus!"

Hearing her daughter's step in the anteroom, she ran out quickly.

The Tragedy of a Genius 79

"What d'you want, Marguerite?" she asked her eldest daughter.

"My dear mother, M. Pierquin has just come. If he remains to dinner, we'll want linen, and you forgot to leave any out this morning——"

Mme Claes took out of her pocket a bunch of small keys, handed them to her daughter, pointing out to her the cupboards which garnished the ante-room and said :

"My daughter, take your linen on the right, in the Graindorge store.—Since my dear Balthazar is returning to me to-day, give him back to me in his entirety," she said on re-entering, and lending her face a look of gentle malice. "My friend, go to your room, do me the favour of dressing, we have Pierquin to dinner. Come now, throw away those ragged clothes. Just look at these spots! Isn't it muriatic or sulphuric acid which has edged all these holes with yellow? Come now, make yourself young again, I'm going to send Mulquinier to you when I've changed my dress."

Balthazar wanted to go into his room by the door of communication, but he had forgotten it was closed on her side. He went out by the anteroom.

"Marguerite, put the linen on a sofa, and come and dress me, I don't want Martha," said Mme Claes, calling her daughter.

Balthazar had taken hold of Marguerite, had turned her towards him with a joyous movement, saying :

80 The Tragedy of a Genius

"Good day, my child! You're very pretty to-day in that muslin dress, with that pink girdle!"

Then he kissed her on the forehead and pressed her hand.

"Mamma, papa has just kissed me!" cried Marguerite, entering her mother's room; "he seems so glad, so happy!"

"My child, your father is a very great man; it will soon be three years that he is working for his family's glory and fortune, and he believes he has reached the goal of his researches. To-day must be for all of us a grand holiday——"

"My dear Mama," answered Marguerite, "our servants were so sad at seeing him keep aloof, that we shall not be alone in our joy—Oh! do put on another girdle, that one's too faded."

"Very good, but let's hurry, I want to go and speak to Pierquin. Where is he?"

"In the parlour, he is amusing himself with Jean."

"Where are Gabriel and Félicie?"

"I hear them in the garden."

"Well, go down quickly; take care they don't pluck any tulips! Your father has not yet seen them this year, and he might like to look at them to-day after dinner. Tell Mulquinier to take up to your father whatever he wants for dressing."

When Marguerite had gone, Mme Claes cast a glance at her children through the windows of her room which opened on the garden, and saw

The Tragedy of a Genius 81

them occupied in watching one of those green-winged, glittering, gold-spotted insects which are vulgarly called *couturières*.

"Be wise, my well-beloved," she said, partly closing the window which she kept open to air the room.

She then knocked gently at the door of communication to make sure her husband had not gone off into a fit of abstractedness. He opened, and she said to him delightedly on seeing him undressed :

"You won't leave me long alone with Pierquin, will you? You will join me quickly?"

She went down the stairs so briskly that no stranger would have recognised the footstep of a cripple.

"Whilst monsieur was carrying madame," said the valet, whom she met on the stairs, "he tore the dress, it's only a wretched bit of stuff; but he also broke the jawbone of this figure, and I don't know who can put it to rights again. So there's our staircase quite spoilt, and the balustrade was so fine!"

"Bah! my poor Mulquinier, don't get it repaired, it's not a misfortune."

"What's happened," said Mulquinier to himself, "that it should not be a disaster? Has my master found the *absolute*?"

"Good day, M. Pierquin," said Mme Claes, opening the parlour door.

The notary ran up to give his cousin his arm,

82 The Tragedy of a Genius

but she never took any arm but her husband's ; she therefore thanked her cousin with a smile and said :

" You have come perhaps for the thirty thousand francs ? "

" Yes, madame ; on returning to my place I received a letter of advice from the firm of Protez et Chiffreville, who have drawn on M. Claes six bills of exchange each for five thousand francs."

" Well, don't talk about it to Balthazar to-day," she said. " Dine with us. If he happens to ask you why you have come, find some plausible excuse, I beg of you. Give me the letter, I'll speak to him myself about the matter. All's going well," she went on, seeing the notary's astonishment. " In a few months my husband will probably repay the sums he has borrowed."

Whilst listening to this phrase, uttered in a low voice, the notary gazed at Mlle Claes, who was returning from the garden followed by Gabriel and Félicie, and said :

" I've never seen Mlle Marguerite as pretty as she is just now."

Mme Claes, who had sat down in her easy chair and had taken little Jean on her knees, raised her head, looked at her daughter and the notary, affecting an indifferent air.

Pierquin was of middle height, neither fat nor thin, with a vulgarly handsome face which expressed a sadness which was rather disappointed than melancholy, a dreaminess rather undecided

The Tragedy of a Genius. 83

than pensive ; he passed for a misanthrope, but he was too much interested in things for his divorce with the world to be real. His gaze, habitually lost in the void, his indifferent pose, his affected silence, seemed to suggest depth, whereas they covered in fact the emptiness and nullity of a notary exclusively engaged in human interests, but who was still young enough to be envious. To ally himself to Claes House would have been for him the cause of boundless self-sacrifice, had there not been latent some feeling of greed. He played the generous, but knew how to reckon up.

So without accounting to himself for his change in manners, his attentions were sharp, hard and rough, as are generally those of business men, when Claes seemed to him ruined ; then they became affectionate, easy and almost servile when he suspected some happy issue to his cousin's labours. Now he saw in Marguerite an Infanta whom it was impossible for a mere provincial notary to approach ; now he considered her a poor girl too lucky if he deigned to make her his wife. He was a provincial and Flemish, without malice ; he was not even lacking in devotion and kindness ; but he had a naive egoism which made his qualities incomplete and ridiculous attributes which spoilt his person.

At that moment Mme Claes remembered the curt tone in which the notary had spoken to her under the porch of the Church of Saint-Pierre,

84 The Tragedy of a Genius

and remarked the revolution made by her reply in his manners ; she divined the bottom of his thoughts, and with a perspicacious look she tried to read her daughter's soul to know if she was thinking of her cousin ; but she saw in her merely the most utter indifference.

After a few moments, during which the talk was about town-gossip, the master of the house came down from his room where his wife listened with inexpressible pleasure to his boots creaking on the floor. His walk, similar to that of a young, alert man, proclaimed a complete change, and the expectation caused in Mme Claes by his coming appearance was so lively that she hardly contrived to suppress a trembling when he came down the stairs. Balthazar quickly appeared in the then fashionable costume. He wore well-waxed boots which left the top of a white silk sock visible, breeches of blue kerseymere with gilt buttons, a white, flowered waistcoat and a blue dress-coat. He had trimmed his beard, combed his hair, perfumed his head, cut his nails and washed his hands with so much care that he was hardly to be recognised by those who had seen him recently. Instead of an old man almost mad, his children, his wife and the notary beheld a man of forty whose affable, courteous face was full of seductions. The fatigue and sufferings which were betrayed by the leanness of his contours and the tightness of the skin over the bones possessed even a kind of grace.

The Tragedy of a Genius 85

"Good day, Pierquin," said Balthazar Claes.

Having become again a father and husband, the chemist took his last child from his wife's knees and lifted him up in the air, alternately making him descend rapidly and raising him up again.

"Look at this mite!" he said to the notary. "Does not so pretty a creature give you a longing to marry? Believe me, my dear sir, the pleasures of a family console for everything. Brr!" he cried, lifting up Jean. "Pound!" he cried, putting him on the ground. "Brr! Pound!"

The child laughed loudly at seeing itself alternately on a level with the ceiling and on the floor. The mother turned aside her eyes so as not to betray the emotion which was stirred in her by a game so apparently simple and which was for her quite a domestic revolution.

"Let's see how you walk," said Balthazar, putting his son on the floor and going and throwing himself in an easy chair.

The child ran to its father, attracted by the shining of the gold buttons which attached the breeches above the tie of the boots.

"You're a darling!" cried the father, kissing him. "You're a Claes, you walk straight. Well, Gabriel, how's old Morillon?" he asked his eldest son, seizing his ear and twisting it. "D'you defend yourself valiantly in your school exercises? Are you grinding away vigorously at mathematics?"

86 The Tragedy of a Genius

Then Balthazar got up, came to Pierquin, and said to him with the affectionate curiosity that distinguished him :

" My dear sir, perhaps you have something to ask me ? "

He gave him his arm and drew him into the garden, adding :

" Come and see my tulips."

Mme Claes gazed at her husband as he went out, and could not contain her joy at seeing him again so young, so affable, so perfectly himself ; she got up, took her daughter by the waist and kissed her, saying :

" My dear Marguerite, my darling child, I love you to-day even more than usual."

" It's a long time since I have seen father so amiable," she answered.

Lemulquinier came to announce dinner was served. In order to avoid the offer of Pierquin's arm, Mme Claes took Balthazar's and the whole family passed into the dining-room.

This room, whose ceiling was composed of plain beams, but embellished by paintings, which were washed and restored every year, was furnished with high oak sideboards on whose shelves could be seen the most curious pieces of the patrimonial plate. The walls were tapestried with violet leather, on which hunting scenes had been impressed in gilt touches. Here and there, carefully arranged above the sideboards, shone the plumage of strange birds and rare shells.

The Tragedy of a Genius 87

The chairs had not been changed since the beginning of the sixteenth century and displayed the square form, the wreathed columns and the small back provided with a fringed stuff whose fashion was so widespread, that Raphael illustrated it in his picture called "*La Vierge à la Chaise.*" The wood of it had become black, but the gilt nails gleamed as if they were new and the stuffs, carefully tended, were of a wonderful red hue. Flanders lived again there in its entirety with its Spanish innovations.

On the table the water-jugs, the flagons had the respectable air which is given them by the rounded bellies of ancient form. The glasses were certainly the tall old glasses on foot which are seen in all the pictures of the Dutch or Flemish school. The plate, stoneware and ornamented with figures coloured after the manner of Bernard Palissy, came from the English manufactory of Wedgwood. The silver was massive, with square edges, with full bosses, real family silver whose pieces, all different in chiselling, fashion, shape, testified to the beginnings of the prosperity and the progress of the fortune of the Claes.

The napkins had fringes, a quite Spanish fashion. As for linen everybody may imagine that the Claes made it a point of honour to possess magnificent linen. This linen, this silver was intended for the daily use of the family. The front house where fêtes were held had its particular luxury, whose marvels, reserved for gala days,

88 The Tragedy of a Genius

impressed on them a solemnity which no longer exists when things are cheapened as it were by habitual use. In the back quarters everything was ear-marked by a patriarchal simplicity. Finally (a charming detail), a vine ran outside along the windows which the branches bordered on every side.

"You remain faithful to traditions, madam," said Pierquin on receiving a plate of *soupe au thym*, in which Flemish and Dutch cooks put little balls of meat rolled and mixed with slices of grilled bread. "Here is the Sunday soup customary among our forefathers! Your house and that of my uncle Des Raquets are the only ones where this soup can now be found, historic as it is in the Netherlands—Ah! I beg pardon, old M. Savaron de Savarus is still found to have it served at his house at Tournai; but everywhere else ancient Flanders is vanishing. Furniture is now manufactured *à la grecque*, you see everywhere nothing but helmets, bucklers, lances and piles of arms. Everybody is rebuilding his house, selling his old furniture, recasting his plate, or bartering it against Sèvres porcelain which is not worth either the old Saxon or the Chinese.

"Oh! as for me, I am Flemish in soul. So my heart bleeds at seeing the coppersmiths buying for the price of mere wood or metal our beautiful furniture incrusting with copper or tin. But the social state wants to change skin, I believe. Even the very processes of art are being lost! When

The Tragedy of a Genius 89

everything has to go quick, nothing can be conscientiously done. During my last visit to Paris I was taken to see the paintings on show at the Louvre. On my word of honour, those canvasses, without air, without depth, were mere screens, in which the painters are afraid to put any colour. And their intention is, they say, to upset our old school—Ah ! rot——!”

“Our ancient painters,” replied Balthazar, “studied the divers combinations and resistance of colours, by submitting them to the action of sun and rain. But you’re right ; to-day the material resources of art are less cultivated than ever.”

Mme Claes was not listening to the conversation. On hearing the notary say that porcelain services were fashionable, she had at once conceived the bright idea of selling the heavy plate from her brother’s bequest, hoping to be thus able to pay off the thirty thousand francs her husband owed.

“Ah ! Ah !” said Balthazar to the notary when Mme Claes again paid attention to the talk, “so they’re discussing my goings-on at Douai ?”

“Yes,” answered Pierquin ; “everyone’s asking what you’re spending so much money on. Yesterday I heard the First President deploring that a man of your talent should be seeking the philosopher’s stone. I then took the liberty of replying that you were too educated not to know that that would be measuring oneself with the impossible, too Christian to believe you could triumph over God, and, like all the Claes, too good

90 The Tragedy of a Genius

a calculator to change your money for trash and rubbish. Still, I will admit I have shared the regrets caused by your withdrawal to the whole of society. You really no longer belong to the town. Truly, madam, you would have been delighted had you been able to hear everybody's praises of yourself and M. Claes."

"You acted like a good relation in rebutting imputations whose least harm would be to render me ridiculous," replied Balthazar. "Ah! the Douaisians think me ruined! Well, my dear Pierquin, in two months, to celebrate the anniversary of my marriage, I shall give a fête whose magnificence will restore me the esteem which our dear compatriots bestow on cash."

VII

MME CLAES grew very red. The anniversary had been forgotten for two years.

Like those madmen who have moments during which their faculties shine with unusual brilliance, Balthazar had never been so delicately charming in his affectionateness. He showed himself full of attentions for his children and his talk was seductive in its grace, wit, pointedness. This return of fatherhood, so long absent, was certainly the finest fête he could bestow on his wife, for whom his word and his look had assumed again that constant sympathy of expression which is felt from heart to heart, and proves a delicious sameness of feeling.

Old Lemulquinier seemed to grow young once more ; he came and went with an unaccustomed alertness caused by the accomplishment of his secret hopes. The change so suddenly effected in his master's manners was for him still more significant than for Mme Claes. When the family saw happiness the valet saw a fortune. In helping Balthazar in his manipulations he had also married his madness. Whether he had grasped the extent of his researches in the explanations that escaped the mouth of the chemist when the goal retreated

92 The Tragedy of a Genius

beneath his hands, or the man's inborn inclination to imitate had caused him to adopt the ideas of him in whose atmosphere he lived, Lemulquinier had conceived for his master a superstitious sentiment compounded of terror, admiration and selfishness. The laboratory was to him what a lottery office is to the crowd, organised hope. Every night he went to bed saying to himself: "To-morrow perhaps we'll swim in gold!" And next day he woke up with a faith ever as lively as on the night before.

His name pointed to an altogether Flemish origin. The common people were formerly only known by a sobriquet derived from their business, their country, their physical conformation, or their moral qualities. This sobriquet became the name of the burgess family they founded at the period of their emancipation. In Flanders the traders in flax thread were called "mulquiniers," and such was doubtless the profession of the man who among the old valet's ancestors passed from the serf to the burgess state, until unknown misfortunes reduced the trader's grandson to his original serf state, plus wages. So the history of Flanders, its thread and its commerce were summed up in the old servant who was often called Mulquinier for euphony.

His character and physiognomy were not without originality. His triangular-shaped face was broad, high, and scarred by small-pox, which had given it fantastic appearances, by leaving

The Tragedy of a Genius 93

on it a number of white, shining lines. Thin and tall, his walk was grave, mysterious. His small eyes, orange-tinted like his yellow wig, looked only aslant. His exterior was therefore in harmony with the feeling of curiosity he excited. His quality as an assistant initiated into his master's secrets, about whose labours he was silent, invested him with fascination. The inhabitants of the Rue de Paris saw him passing with an interest combined with fear, for he indulged in replies that were sibylline and always overflowing with treasure.

Proud of being necessary to his master, he exerted over his comrades a sort of cantankerous authority, by which he profited for himself by obtaining concessions which made him half master in the house. Contrary to the Flemish servants who were extremely attached to the house, he had solely affection for Balthazar. If any chagrin afflicted Mme Claes, or if any favourable event occurred in the family, he would eat his buttered bread, drink his beer with habitual phlegm.

Dinner over, Mme Claes proposed taking coffee in the garden, in front of the bed of tulips which adorned its centre. The earthen pots in which were the tulips, whose titles could be read on engraved tiles, had been buried and arranged in such a way as to form a pyramid, on the top of which rose a dragon-mouthed tulip which Balthazar alone possessed.

This flower, named *tulipa Claesiana*, combined

94 The Tragedy of a Genius

the seven colours, and its long *échancrures* seemed gilded at the edges. Balthazar's father, who had several times refused ten thousand florins for it, took such great care that nobody could steal a single grain of it, that he kept it in the parlour and often spent whole days in contemplating it. The stem was huge, very straight, strong, of an admirable green; the plant's proportions were in harmony with the calix, whose colours were distinguished by the brilliant clearness which once gave such value to these sumptuous flowers.

"There's thirty or forty thousand francs' worth of tulips," said the notary, looking alternately at his cousin and the thousand-hued bush.

Mme Claes was too enthusiastic at the sight of the flowers, which the beams of the setting sun made like jewelry, to clearly grasp the meaning of the notary's remark.

"What use is it?" went on the notary, addressing Balthazar. "You ought to sell them."

"Bah! Do I need money?" answered Claes, making the gesture of a man to whom forty thousand francs seemed a mere trifle.

There was a moment's silence, during which the children made several exclamations:

"Look at this one, mama!"

"Oh, here's a fine one!"

"His is this one called?"
 out originality. "Yess for human reason!" cried broad, high, and his hands and joining them in had given it fantasti A combination of hydrogen

The Tragedy of a Genius 95

and oxygen causes to arise through its different proportionings, in a similar environment and on a similar principle, those colours, which each constitute a different result."

His wife certainly understood the terms of this proposition, which was too rapidly uttered for her to grasp it entirely. Balthazar reflected that she had studied his favourite science, and said to her, making a mysterious sign :

" You try to understand ; you don't yet know what I mean ! "

And he appeared to fall back into one of his customary meditations.

" I believe it," said Pierquin, taking a cup of coffee from Marguerite's hands. " Drive away nature, it returns at a gallop ! " he added in a whisper to Mme Claes. " You will be so kind as to speak to him yourself, the devil would not draw him out of his ponderings. So things stand till to-morrow."

He bade good-bye to Claes, who feigned not to hear him, kissed little Jean, whom his mother held in her arms, and withdrew after a deep bow.

When the entrance gate resounded on being shut Balthazar took hold of his wife by her waist, and relieved the anxiety possibly arising from his pretended reverie by whispering in her ear :

" I well knew how to get rid of him ! "

Mme Claes turned her head to her husband without being ashamed to show him the tears that came to her eyes ; they were so sweet !

96 The Tragedy of a Genius

Then she leant her forehead on Balthazar's shoulder and let Jean slide to the ground.

"Let's return to the parlour," she said after a pause.

During the whole evening Balthazar was almost wild in his merriment; he invented a thousand games for the children, and played so well on his own account that he did not perceive two or three absences of his wife. About half-past nine, when Jean had gone to bed and Marguerite returned to the parlour, after helping her sister Félicie to undress, she found her mother sitting in the big easy chair and her father holding her hand talking with her. She was afraid to bother her parents, and seemed to think of withdrawing without speaking; Mme Claes noticed it and said:

"Come, *Marguerite*, come, my dear child."

Then she drew her towards her and kissed her piously on the forehead, adding:

"Take your book with you to your room and go to bed early."

"Good night, my darling daughter," said Balthazar.

Marguerite kissed her father and went off. Claes and his wife remained some moments alone, gazing at the last tints of twilight, which were fading in the leafage of the garden already grown dark, whose outlines could scarce be seen in the dim gleams. When it was nearly night Balthazar said to his wife in a voice of emotion:

The Tragedy of a Genius 97

“ Let us go up.”

A long time before English custom had made a wife's room a sacred place, that of a Flemish woman was impenetrable. The worthy *hausfrau* of the country did not constitute it a belonging of virtue, but a habit contracted in childhood, a domestic superstition which made a bedroom a delightful sanctuary where one breathed affectionate feelings, where simplicity was united with all the sweetest and most respect-worthy elements in social life. In Mme Claes's particular position every woman would have liked to collect the most elegant things around her ; but she had done so with exquisite taste, knowing what influence the aspect of our surrounding exercises on the sentiments. In the case of a pretty woman it would have been luxury ; in hers it was a necessity. She had understood the meaning of the words, “ One makes oneself a pretty woman ! ” a maxim that guided all the acts of Napoleon's first wife and rendered her often false, whilst Mme Claes was ever natural and true.

Although Balthazar knew his wife's room well, his forgetfulness of the material things of life had been so complete that on entering he felt sweet shiverings, as if he saw it for the first time. A triumphant woman's sumptuous gaiety burst forth in the splendid colours of the tulips which rose from the long necks of big vases of Chinese porcelain, skilfully disposed, and in the profusion of the lights, whose effects could only be compared

98 The Tragedy of a Genius

to those of the most joyful trumpeting. The gleam of the candles lent a harmonious brilliance to the grey silk stuffs, whose monotony was varied by golden reflections soberly distributed over certain objects and by the diverse tones of the flowers which resembled sheaves of jewelry. The secret of the preparations was he, always he ! Joséphine could not tell Balthazar more eloquently that he was ever the source of her pleasures and her pains. The view of the room set the soul in a delicious state and dispelled any gloomy idea, leaving only the sentiment of an equable and pure happiness.

The material of the tapestry bought in China cast off that suave odour which penetrates the body without tiring it. Lastly the carefully drawn curtains showed a desire for solitude, a jealous intention of guarding the least sounds of speech, and to shut in there the looks of the re-won spouse. Adorned with her beautiful black hair, which fell down from either side of her forehead like two crow's wings, Mme Claes, enveloped in a dressing-gown that reached to her neck and was provided with a long tippet, in which lace abounded, went and drew the tapestried door close, which did not allow of any sound coming from outside. From there Joséphine cast at her husband, who had sat down near the chimney-piece, one of those merry smiles by which a clever woman, whose soul comes at times to beautify her face, is able to express irresistible hopes.

The Tragedy of a Genius 99

A woman's chiefest charm consists in a constant appeal to man's generosity, in a gracious declaration of weakness by which she makes him proud, and awakens in him the most magnificent sentiments. Does not a confession of weakness carry with it magical seductions? When the rings of the door had slid heavily on their wooden curtain-rod, she turned to her husband, seemed to want to hide at that instant her bodily flaws by leaning her hand on a chair, so as to drag herself gracefully along. It was calling for help. Balthazar, who was for an instant plunged in the contemplation of her olive-hued head, which was relieved by the grey background, attracting and gratifying the eye, rose and took his wife, and carried her on to the sofa. That was exactly what she wanted.

"You promised me," she said, taking his hand, which she held between her own electrifying hands, "to initiate me into the secret of your investigations. Admit, my friend, that I am worthy of knowing it, since I have had the courage to study a science condemned by the Church to be in a condition to understand you. But I am curious, don't hide anything from me. Now tell me by what chance one morning you got up full of care when the night before I had left you so happy?"

"And it's to hear me talk chemistry that you have dressed with so much coquetry!"

"My friend, is it not for me the greatest of pleasures to receive a confidence which makes me advance further in your heart? Is it not a soul-

100 The Tragedy of a Genius

understanding which includes and engenders all life's happinesses? Your love returns to me pure and whole; I want to know what idea has been so strong as to deprive me of it so long. Yes, I am more jealous of a thought than of all women taken together. Love is immense, but not boundless; whilst science has limitless depths where I could not see you go alone. I detest anything that may come between us. If you won the glory after which you are running I should be unhappy; would it not give you lively enjoyments? I alone, sir, ought to be the fount of your pleasures."

"No, it's not an idea, my lovely angel, that has set me in this beautiful path, but a man."

"A man!" she cried in terror.

"Do you remember, *Pépita*, the Polish officer whom we had staying with us in 1809?"

"If I remember!" she said. "I've often grown impatient because my memory made me so often see again his eyes like tongues of fire, the hollows over his eyebrows where appeared embers from hell-fire, his broad hairless skull, his uptrained moustaches, his angular, wasted face!—And well! what a terrifying calm in his walk!—If there had been room in the inns he would certainly not have slept here——"

"That Polish gentleman was called M. Adam de Wierzchownia," went on Balthazar. "When you left us alone in the parlour at night we began by chance to talk chemistry. Driven by poverty from studying that science he had turned soldier.

The Tragedy of a Genius 101

I think it was when we were having a glass of sugar-water that we recognised each other as adepts. When I had told Mulquinier to bring sugar in pieces, the captain made a gesture of surprise.

“ ‘ You’ve studied chemistry ? ’ he asked me.

“ ‘ With Lavoisier,’ I answered.

“ ‘ You’re very lucky to be free and well-off,’ he cried.

“ And there issued from his breast one of those man’s sighs which reveal a hell of grief hidden beneath a skull or enclosed in a heart, in fact, it was something ardent, concentrated, which words do not express. He finished his thinking by a look which froze me. After a pause he told me that Poland being quasi-dead, he had taken refuge in Sweden. He had there sought consolation in the study of chemistry, for which he had always felt an irresistible vocation.

“ ‘ Well,’ he added, ‘ I see you have, like myself, recognised that gum arabic, sugar and powdered starch produce a substance absolutely similar and in analysis a like *qualitative* result.’

“ He paused again and, after examining me with a scrutinising eye, he told me confidentially, in low tones, solemn words whose general sense alone has to-day remained in my memory ; but he accompanied them with a power of sound, with warm inflexions and with a force of gesture that stirred my entrails and struck my understanding as a hammer beats the iron on an anvil.

102 The Tragedy of a Genius

Now here is an abridged summary of these reasonings which were for me the coal put by God on Isaiah's tongue, for my studies with Lavoisier enabled me to grasp their entire significance :

“ ‘ Sir,’ he said to me, ‘ the parity of those three substances apparently so different led me to think that all the productions of nature ought to have an identical principle. The labours of modern chemistry have proved the truth of this law for the most considerable part of natural effects. Chemistry divides creation into two distinct portions : organic nature, inorganic nature. By embracing all the vegetable or animal creations in which appears a more or less perfected organisation or, to be more exact, a more or less great motility which determines more or less feeling in them, organic nature is certainly the most important part of our world. Now analysis has reduced all the products of this nature to four simple bodies, which are, three gases : azote, hydrogen, oxygen ; and another simple non-metallic and solid body, carbon.

“ ‘ Inorganic nature, on the contrary, which is so little varied, destitute of movement, of feeling, and to which may be denied the gift of growth lightly accorded it by Linnaeus, is composed of fifty-three simple bodies whose different combinations form all its products. Is it probable the means are more numerous where the results are less ? Therefore my old master's opinion is that these fifty-three bodies have a common

The Tragedy of a Genius 103

principle, modified of old by the action of a power to-day extinct, but which human genius should bring to life again.

“ ‘ Well, suppose one instant that the activity of that power is resuscitated we should have a unitarian chemistry. Organic and inorganic nature would probably rest on four principles, and if we succeeded in decomposing azote, which we have to regard as a negation, we should only have three. Here we are already near the great Ternary of the ancients and mediæval alchemists, at whom we wrongly jeer. Modern chemistry is as yet only that. It’s much and it’s little. It’s much because chemistry has grown accustomed not to recoil before any obstacle ; it’s little by comparison with what is left to be done. Chance has done it good service, that fine science ! For instance, did not this tear of pure crystallised carbon, the diamond, seem the last substance possible of creation ? The ancient alchemists who believed gold decomposable, consequently creatable, recoiled at the idea of producing the diamond ; but we have discovered the nature and law of its composition.

“ ‘ As for me,’ he added, ‘ I went further ! An experiment proved to me that the mysterious Ternary with which people have been occupied since immemorial time will not be found in the actual analyses which lack direction towards a fixed point. Here, first of all, is the experiment. Sow some seeds of cress (to take one substance

104 The Tragedy of a Genius

among all those of organic nature) in flower of sulphur (to take again a simple body). Pour distilled water over the seeds in order not to allow any principle which is not certain to penetrate into the products of the germination! The seeds grow, bud out in a known environment by feeding only on principles known by analysis. Cut several times the stem of the plants, in order to get yourself a large enough quantity of them to obtain a good bulk of cinders by burning them and thus being able to operate on a certain quantity; well, on analysing the cinders you will find silicic acid, aluminium, phosphate and carbonate of calcium, carbonate of magnesium, sulphate and carbonate of potassium and ferric oxide, as if the cress had grown in the earth by the borders of water.

“ ‘ Now those substances did not exist either in the sulphur, a simple body, which served as soil to the plant, nor in the water used to bedew it whose composition is known; but as they are not in the seed either, we can only explain their presence in the plant by supposing an element common to the bodies contained in the cress and to those that served it for an environment. Thus the air, the distilled water, the flowers of sulphur and the substances given by analysing the cress, viz. potassium, lime, magnesium, aluminium, etc., would have a common principle wandering in the atmosphere such as the sun makes it. From this irrefutable experiment,’ he cried, ‘ I deduced

The Tragedy of a Genius 105

the existence of *the absolute* ! A substance common to all created things, modified by a unique force, such is the precise and clear position of the problem offered by the absolute which has appeared to me investigable.

“ ‘Then you encounter the mysterious Ternary before which humanity has prostrated itself in every age : the primary matter, the medium, the result. You will find the terrible number Three in everything human, it dominates religions, sciences and laws. At this point,’ he added, ‘war and poverty stopped my work—You are a pupil of Lavoisier, you are rich and master of your time, I can therefore communicate my conjectures to you. Here is the goal which my personal experiments led me to see. MATTER-ONE must be a principle common to the three gases and to carbon. The MEDIUM must be the principle common to negative and positive electricity. Go on to the discovery of proofs that will establish these two truths, and you will have the supreme reason of all the effects of Nature.

“ ‘Oh, sir,’ he said, striking his forehead, ‘when one carries there the last word of creation in fore-feeling the absolute, is it living to be dragged into the movement of this crowd of men who at a fixed hour rush at one another without knowing what they’re at ? My actual life is exactly the inverse of a dream. My body goes, comes, acts, finds itself amid firing, cannons, men, traverses Europe at the pleasure of a power I obey whilst despising

106 The Tragedy of a Genius

it. My soul has no consciousness of such acts, it remains fixed, plunged in an idea, absorbed in that idea, the search for the absolute, that principle by which certain seeds, absolutely similar, placed in an identical environment, yield the one white calices, the other yellow calices ! A phenomenon applicable to silkworms, which, fed on the same leaves and constituted without apparent difference, make the one yellow silk, the other white silk ; lastly, applicable to man himself, who often has legitimately children entirely dissimilar from the mother and himself.

“ ‘ Does not the logical deduction from this fact apply, moreover, the reason of all Nature’s effects ? Eh ! what is more in conformity with our ideas about God than to believe He made everything by the simplest means ? The Pythagorean worship of the number ONE, whence come all numbers and which represents matter-one ; the worship of the number Two, the first aggregation and the type of all the others ; that of the number THREE which in all ages has adumbrated God, i.e. matter, force and product ; all this summed up traditionally the confused knowledge of the absolute ! Stahl, Becher, Paracelsus, Agrippa, all the great searchers after occult causes had as their watchword the Trismegistus, which means the great Ternary. Ignoramus accustomed to condemn alchemy, that transcendental chemistry, doubtless do not know that we are busied in justifying the passionate researches of

The Tragedy of a Genius 107

those great men ! The absolute being found, I should then have joined intimately with the movement. Ah ! whilst I am feeding on powder and commanding men to die quite uselessly, my old master is heaping discovery on discovery, he is flying towards the absolute ! And I, I shall die like a dog, at the corner of a battery ! ' "

VIII

“WHEN this poor great man had somewhat recovered his calmness, he said to me with a kind of touching brotherliness :

“ ‘ If I lit on an experiment to be made, I should bequeath it you before dying.’ ”

“ My Pépita,” said Balthazar, clasping his wife’s hand, “ tears of rage flowed down the man’s hollow cheeks whilst he was hurling into my soul the fire of that reasoning which Lavoisier had already timidly made for himself without daring to abandon himself to it——”

“ What ! ” exclaimed Mme Claes, who could not resist interrupting her husband. “ Did that man whilst spending a night under our roof take from us your affections, destroy by a single phrase and by a single word a family’s happiness ? O my dear Balthazar, did that man make the sign of the cross ? Did you examine him well ? The Tempter alone can have that yellow eye from which issued the fire of Prometheus. Yes, the demon alone could tear you from me. Since that day you’ve been no longer father or husband or head of the family——”

“ ‘ What ! ’ ” said Balthazar, standing upright in the room and casting a piercing glance at his

The Tragedy of a Genius 109

wife ; " you blame your husband for rising above the rest of men, in order to be able to spread under your feet the divine purple of glory, like a meanest offering compared with your heart's treasures ! But you don't know what I have done during the three years ? Giant's strides, my Pépita ! " he said, growing excited.

His face appeared then to his wife more brilliant beneath the fire of genius than it had been beneath love's fire, and she wept as she listened.

" I have combined chlorine and azote, I have decomposed several bodies considered simple up to now, I have found new metals. Why," he said on seeing his wife's tears, " I have decomposed tears. Tears contain a little phosphate of lime, chloride of sodium, mucus and water."

He went on speaking without noticing the horrible *convulsion that traversed Joséphine's* face, he was mounted on science which was carrying him off on its crupper, with wings outspread, very far from the material world.

" That analysis, my dear, is one of the best proofs of the system of the absolute. All life implies a combustion. According to the fire's greater or less activity life is more or less persistent. Thus the destruction of a mineral is indefinitely retarded, because combustion in it is virtual, latent or insensible. Thus the vegetables which are incessantly refreshed by the combination whence humidity results live indefinitely, and there are several vegetables contemporary with the

110 The Tragedy of a Genius

last cataclysm. But every time that Nature has perfected an apparatus, that with an unknown end it has introduced into it feeling, instinct or intelligence, three marked degrees in the organic system, these three organisms require a combustion whose activity is in direct proportion to the result obtained. Man, who represents the highest point of intelligence and offers to us the only apparatus from which results a half-creative power, *thought!* is among the zoological creations that in which combustion is encountered in its intensest degree and whose powerful effects are in some sort revealed by the phosphates, sulphates and carbonates furnished by his body in our analysis.

"Would not those substances be the traces left in him by the action of the electric fluid, the principle of all fecundation? Would not electricity manifest itself in him by combinations more varied than in any other animal? Would he not have faculties greater than any other creature for absorbing stronger portions of absolute principle, and would he not assimilate them to himself so as to make out of them in a more perfect machine his strength and his ideas? I believe so. Man is a matrass. So according to me the idiot would be he whose brain should contain less phosphorus or any other product of electromagnetism; the madman he whose brain should contain too much; the average man he who should have little of them; the man of genius he whose brain should be steeped in them to a

The Tragedy of a Genius 111

suitable extent. The man constantly in love, the firebrand, the dancers, the great eater are those who should displace the force resulting from their electrical apparatus. Thus our feelings——”

“Enough, Balthazar! You frighten me, you are committing sacrileges. What! Is my love——?”

“Ethereal matter which is given off,” answered Claes, “and which is no doubt the word of the absolute. Now reflect that if I—I am the first! If I am the first to discover—if I discover—if I discover!”

Saying these words in three different tones his face gradually became elevated by the expression of one inspired.

“I shall make metals, I shall make diamonds, I shall repeat Nature,” he exclaimed.

“Will you be the happier for it?” asked Joséphine in despair. “Cursed science! Cursed demon! You forget, Claes, you are committing the sin of pride of which Satan was guilty. You are trying to outdo God.”

“Oh! Oh! God!”

“He denies it!” she cried, her hands writhing. “Claes, God disposes of a power you will never have.”

On this argument, which seemed to annul his dear science, he looked at his wife, trembling.

“What?” said he.

“The unique fact, motion. That is what I have gathered from the books you have con-

112 The Tragedy of a Genius

strained me to read. Analyse flowers, fruits, Malaga wine; you will truly discover their principles, which appear, like those of your cress, in an environment that appears foreign to them; you may, strictly speaking, discover them in nature; but will you by gathering them together make flowers, fruits, Malaga wine? Will you have the sun's incomprehensible effects? Will you have Spain's atmosphere? To decompose is not to create."

"If I discover the coercing force, I shall be able to create."

"Nothing will stop him!" cried Pépita despairingly. "Oh! my love, it is killed, I have lost it——"

She burst into tears, and her eyes, animated by grief and by the holiness of the feelings they were putting forth, shone more beautifully than ever through her tears.

"Yes," she went on, sobbing, "you are dead to everything. Science, I see, is more powerful in you than yourself, and its soaring has carried you too high for you ever to descend again to be a companion to a poor woman. What happiness can I still offer you? Ah! I would wish to believe for a sad solace that God had created you in order to manifest His workings and sing His praises, that He has shut within your bosom an irresistible, mastering force. But no, God is good, He would leave in your heart some thoughts for a woman who adores you, for the children whom you ought

The Tragedy of a Genius 113

to protect. Yes! the devil only can help you to walk alone amid those issueless abysses, amid those darknesses where you are not lighted by the faith from above, but by a horrible belief in your faculties! Otherwise, would you not have perceived, my friend, that you have devoured nine hundred thousand francs in three years? Oh! be just to me, you, my God on this earth, I reproach you nothing.

“If we were alone I should bring you all our fortunes on my knees, saying: ‘Take them, cast them in your furnace, make smoke of them!’ and I should laugh to see it all whirled away. If you were poor, I should go and beg without shame to get you the coal needful for keeping up your furnace. In fact, if by throwing myself into it I enabled you to find your execrable absolute, Claes, I should throw myself in with happiness, since you set your renown and your delight in that still unfound secret!—But our children, Claes! our children! what will become of them if you do not soon divine that hellish secret? D’you know why Pierquin came? He came to ask you for the thirty thousand francs you owe without possessing them. Your properties no longer belong to you. I told him you had the thirty thousand francs, in order to spare you the embarrassment in which his questions would have put you; but to pay off the sum I thought of selling our old plate.”

She saw her husband’s eyes near to overflowing

114 The Tragedy of a Genius

and cast herself desperately at his feet, raising suppliant hands towards him.

"My friend," she exclaimed, "stay for an instant your investigations; let's economise the money needed for you when you resume them later on if you can't give up the pursuit of your work. Oh! I'm not judging it! I'll blow the furnaces if you like, but don't reduce our children to rags; you can't love them any more; science has eaten your heart, don't bequeath them an unhappy life in exchange for the happiness you owed them. The mother's feeling has too often been the weaker in my heart; yes, I've often wished not to be a mother in order to be able to unite myself more infinitely to your soul, to your life! So in order to stifle my remorse I must plead with you the cause of your children before my own cause."

Her hair had unrolled and floated on her shoulders, her eyes darted forth a thousand feelings like so many arrows, she triumphed over her rival. Balthazar lifted her up, carried her on to the sofa, placed himself at her feet.

"So I have caused you grief?" he said with the accent of a man awakening from a painful dream.

"Poor Claes, you will cause us some more despite yourself," she replied, passing her hand through his hair. "Come and sit by me," she added, pointing to a place on the sofa. "Well, I've forgotten all, since you're returning to us."

The Tragedy of a Genius 115

Come, my friend, we'll repair everything ; but you won't again leave your wife, will you ? Say yes. Let me, my great and beautiful Claes, exert on your noble heart the feminine influence so necessary to the happiness of unfortunate artists, of suffering great men ! You may be rude to me, you may break me, if you like, but you will permit me to oppose you a little for your good. I shall never abuse the power you grant me. Be celebrated, but be happy also. Don't put chemistry before us ! Listen, we shall be very complaisant, we shall allow science to enter with us in partnership of your heart.; but be just, do give us our half ! Tell me, is not my unselfishness sublime ? ”

She made Balthazar smile. With the wonderful art possessed by women she had brought the highest question into the domain of badinage, where women are mistresses. However, although she seemed to laugh, her heart was so violently contracted that it recovered hardly the equable, gentle movement of its usual state ; but on seeing arise again in Balthazar's eyes the expression which charmed her, which was her peculiar glory, and revealed to her the complete influence of her old power which she believed lost, she said, smiling :

“ Believe me, Balthazar, Nature has made us for feeling, and although you want us merely to be electrical machines, your gases, your ethereal matters will never explain the gift we possess of discerning the future.”

116 The Tragedy of a Genius

"Yes!" he replied, "by the affinities. The power of vision which makes the poet and the power of deduction which makes the scientist are founded on invisible, intangible and imponderable affinities, which the vulgar herd ranges in the class of moral phenomena, whereas they are physical effects. The prophet sees and deduces. These species of affinities are unfortunately too rare and too little perceptible to be able to be submitted to analysis or observation."

"Is this, then," she said, giving him a kiss to drive away chemistry which she had so unluckily resuscitated, "is this an affinity?"

"No, it's a combination: two substances of the same *sign* do not produce any activity——"

"Get along, keep quiet!" she said, "you'll kill me with grief. Yes, dear, I should not endure to see my rival in the transports of your love."

"But, my dear life, I only think of you; my works are my family's glory, you are at the bottom of all my hopes."

"Come now, look at me!"

The scene had made her as beautiful as a young woman, and of all her person her husband saw only her head above a cloud of muslins and laces.

"Yes, I was very wrong to desert you for science. Now, when I fall back again into my pre-occupations—well, my *Pépita*, you'll drag me out of them; I wish it."

She lowered her eyes and let him take her hand,

The Tragedy of a Genius 117.

her greatest beauty, a hand both powerful and delicate.

"But I want something more still," she said.

"You're so deliciously lovely that you can obtain anything."

"I want to break up your laboratory and put fetters on your science," said she, casting fire through her eyes.

"All right, to the devil with chemistry !"

"This moment abolishes all my sorrows," she rejoined. "Now make me suffer if you like."

Hearing the phrase, tears overcame Balthazar.

"But you're right, I saw you only through a veil and I no longer heard you——"

"If I alone had been in question," said she, "I should have suffered in silence without raising my voice before my sovereign ; but your children need consideration, Claes. I assure you that if you continued thus to squander your wealth, even though your goal would be glorious, the world would give you no credit for it, and its blame would fall back on yourself. Ought it not to suffice you, you, a man of such lofty reach, that your wife has attracted your attention to a danger you did not observe ? Don't let's talk any more about all that," she added, darting a smile at him and a glance full of coquetry. "To-night, my own Claes, let us not be happy by halves."

The morning after this evening so fraught with gravity in the life of the household, Balthazar Claes, from whom Joséphine had doubtless got

118 The Tragedy of a Genius

some promise about stopping his labours, did not go up to his laboratory, and remained by her the whole day. The next day the family made preparations to move into the country, where they remained about two months, and whence they only returned to town in order to busy themselves with the fête by which Claes intended, as of yore, to celebrate his marriage anniversary. Balthazar then got every day proofs of the disorder his labours and his carelessness had brought his affairs into. Far from enhancing the wound by remarks, his wife ever found palliatives for the evils accomplished.

Of the seven servants kept by Claes on the day of his last reception there remained only Lemulquinier, Josette the cook, and an old chambermaid called Martha, who had not left her mistress since she left the convent; it was therefore impossible to receive the high society of the town with so small a number of domestics. Mme Claes abolished all difficulties by proposing to get a cook from Paris, to drill the gardener's son for service, and to borrow Pierquin's valet. Thus nobody would yet perceive their embarrassed condition. During the twenty days of preparation, Mme Claes was able by skill to beguile her husband's idleness; now she charged him with the choosing of the rare flowers that were to adorn the big staircase, the gallery and the apartments; now she dispatched him to Dunkirk for some of those monstrous fish, the glory of the table in the Departement du Nord.

The Tragedy of a Genius 119

A fête like that of Claes was a capital affair, which exacted a deal of care and an active correspondence, in a country where the traditions of hospitality call the honour of families so much into play that for master and men a dinner is like a victory to be won over the guests. The oysters came from Ostend, the grouse from Scotland, the fruit from Paris; in fine, the least accessories were required not to belie the patrimonial luxury. Besides, the ball at Claes House enjoyed a sort of renown. The capital of the Department being then Douai, the soirée in some sort began the winter season and gave the tone to all those in the district. Accordingly for fifteen years Balthazar had made efforts to distinguish himself, and had succeeded so well that each time it had been the talk for twenty leagues around, and there were discussions about the toilettes, the guests, the smallest details, the novelties seen there or what happened. These preparations prevented Claes from thinking about the search for the absolute. Returning to domestic ideas and social life the savant recovered his self-love as a man, as a Fleming, as master of the house, and made up his mind to astonish the country.

He wanted to impress a distinct character on the soirée by some novelty, and he chose among all the fantasies of luxury the prettiest, the richest, the most fleeting, by making of his house a bosage of rare plants, and preparing bouquets

120 The Tragedy of a Genius

of flowers for the women. The other details of the festival corresponded to that unheard-of luxury, nothing was there that seemed likely to make the effect missing. But the 29th Bulletin and the fresh particulars of the disasters suffered by the Grand Army in Russia and at the Bérésina had spread after dinner. A deep and genuine grief seized the Douaisians, who, out of patriotic feeling, unanimously refused to dance.

Among the letters that arrived at Douai from Poland was one for Balthazar. M. de Wierchownia, then at Dresden, where he was dying, he said, of a wound received in one of the last engagements, had wished to bequeath to his host several ideas which had occurred to him about the absolute since their meeting. The letter plunged Claes into a deep reverie which did honour to his patriotism ; but his wife made no mistake. For her the fête was doubly in mourning. The soirée, during which Claes House emitted its last brilliance, had therefore something sombre and sad about it amid so much magnificence, so many curiosities amassed by six generations, each of which had had its mania, and which the Douaisians admired for the last time.

The queen of the day was Marguerite, then sixteen, whom her parents brought out in society. She drew all looks by an extreme simplicity, by her candid air, and especially by her physiognomy which harmonised with the mansion. She truly embodied the young Flemish woman such as the

The Tragedy of a Genius 121

painters of the country have portrayed her : a perfectly round, full head : chestnut hair parted over the forehead in two bands : grey-green eyes : fine arms, an *embonpoint* which did not harm beauty ; a timid air, but on her high, flat forehead a firmness concealed by an apparent calm and gentleness. Without being either sad or melancholy she appeared to have little of high spirits. Reflection, order, the sentiment of duty, the three chief characteristics of the Flemish nature, vivified her face, cold at first sight, to which, however, one's eyes were attracted again by a certain grace in the contours and by a graceful pride, which promised domestic happiness. By a bizarreness unexplained as yet by physiologists she had no feature either of her mother or father, and was a living image of her maternal grandmother, a Conyncks of Bruges, whose portrait, carefully preserved, bore witness to the resemblance.

The supper gave some life to the fête. If the army's disasters forbade the enjoyment of dancing nobody thought they should exclude the pleasures of the table. The patriots promptly withdrew. The indifferent remained, with some card-players and several friends of Claes ; but gradually the house, so brilliantly lit up, in which crowded all the notables of Douai, returned to silence ; and about 1 a.m. the gallery was deserted, the lights were extinguished from saloon to saloon. At last the interior court, at one instant so noisy, so luminous, became black and gloomy again : an image

122 The Tragedy of a Genius

prophetic of the future awaiting the family. When the Claes went back to their room, Balthazar made his wife read the Pole's letter; she gave it him back with a sorrowful gesture, she foresaw the future.

Indeed, reckoning from that day Balthazar ill-disguised the chagrin and boredom overwhelming him. In the morning after family breakfast he played a moment in the parlour with his son Jean, talked with his two daughters engaged in embroidering, sewing or lace-making; but he soon became tired of the games, the talk, he appeared to perform them out of duty. When his wife came down again after dressing, she always found him sitting in the easy-chair gazing at Marguerite and Félicie, without growing impatient at the sound of their bobbins. When the paper came he read it slowly like a retired merchant who does not know how to kill time. Then he got up, observed the sky through the panes, returned and sat down and dreamily poked the fire, like a man the tyranny of whose ideas took away the consciousness of his movements.

Mme Claes deeply regretted her defective education and memory. It was hard for her to sustain for a long time an interesting conversation; besides, it is perhaps impossible between two beings who have told each other everything and are forced to go for subjects of distraction outside the life of the heart or material life. Heart-life has its moments and wants oppositions; the details of

The Tragedy of a Genius 123

material life could not long occupy superior minds accustomed to decide quickly ; and the world is insupportable to loving souls. Two solitary beings who know one another entirely should therefore look for their diversions in the highest regions of thought, for it is impossible to oppose anything small to what is measureless. Then, when a man has been used to handle big things, he becomes unamusable, if he does not keep at the bottom of his heart the principle of candour, the *laissez-aller* which makes people of genius so graciously childlike ; but is not that childhood of the heart a very rare human phenomenon with those whose mission it is to see everything, to know everything, to understand everything ?

IX

DURING the first months Mme Claes got out of this critical situation by incredible efforts suggested by love or necessity. Now she wanted to learn bric-brac which she had never been able to play, and by a fairly conceivable prodigy she at last contrived to know it ; now, she interested Balthazar in the education of his daughters, asking him to direct their rearing. These resources were exhausted. There came a moment when Joséphine found herself before Balthazar like Mme de Maintenon in the presence of Louis XIV ; but without possessing, for the distraction of the slumbering master, either the pomps of power or the ruses of a court which knew how to play comedies like that of the Embassy of the King of Siam or of the Sophy of Persia. The monarch, being reduced, after squandering France, to the expedients of a spendthrift son of a family in order to get money, had no longer youth or success, and felt a fearful impotence amid his grandeurs ; the royal nurse, who had been able to rock the children to sleep, was not always able to lull the father who suffered for having abused things, men, life and God.

Claes, however, suffered from too much power.

The Tragedy of a Genius 125

Oppressed by an idea which dominated him he dreamt of the pomps of science, of treasures for humanity, glory for himself. He suffered as suffers an artist at grips with poverty, like Samson bound to the temple columns. The effect was the same for these two sovereigns, although the intellectual monarch was overwhelmed by his strength and the other by his weakness. What could Pépita alone do against this species of scientific nostalgia? After using up the means afforded by family occupations she called society to her help by giving two *cafés* a week. At Douai *cafés* are the substitute for *teas*. A *café* is a gathering where for a whole evening the guests drink exquisite wines and the liqueurs with which the cellars in this blessed country are overfull, eat confectionery, take black coffee or *café au lait* split with ice; whilst the women sing love-songs, discuss their dresses or chatter the town's big nothings. It is always the pictures of Miéris or Terburg, minus the red feathers on the grey, pointed hats, minus the guitars and the beautiful costumes of the sixteenth century. But the efforts made by Balthazar to play his part well as master of the house, his borrowed affability, the fireworks of his wit, all betrayed the depth of the ill by the weariness to which he was visibly a prey next day.

These parties, feeble palliatives, testified to the seriousness of the malady. These branches met with by Balthazar as he was rolling down his precipice delayed his fall, but made it the heavier.

126 The Tragedy of a Genius

If he never spoke of his former occupations, if he did not utter a regret at feeling the impossibility in which he had placed himself of recommencing his experiments, his movements were sad, his voice weak, the dejection of a convalescent. His weariness sometimes penetrated even into the way in which he took up the pincers to carelessly build in the fire some fantastic pyramid with bits of coal. When he had reached night he felt a visible content: sleep freed him no doubt from an importunate thought; then next day he arose mournfully on perceiving a day to be got through, and seemed to measure the time he had to consume, as a tried traveller contemplates a desert to be crossed.

If Mme Claes knew the cause of the languor she forced herself to ignore how extended its ravages were. Full of courage in mental sufferings, she was without strength against the gentrosities of the heart. She did not dare to question Balthazar when he listened to his daughters' gossip and Jean's laughter with the air of a man absorbed by an after-thought; but she quivered on seeing him shake off his melancholy and trying out of generous sentiment to appear merry so as not to sadden anyone. The father's coquetries with his daughters or his games with Jean brought tears to Joséphine's eyes, who went out to hide the emotion caused by a heroism whose price is well known to women and which breaks their heart; Mme Claes yearned then to cry: "Kill me and

The Tragedy of a Genius 127

do what you like ! ” Balthazar’s eyes insensibly lost their lively fire and assumed the glaucous tint which dulls those of old men. His attentions to his wife, his words, everything in him was struck with heaviness. These symptoms becoming more grave towards the end of April frightened Mme Claes, to whom the sight was intolerable and who had already reproached herself a thousand times whilst admiring the Flemish loyalty with which her husband kept his word.

One day when Balthazar seemed to her more tired than he had ever been she no longer hesitated at sacrificing everything to restore him to life.

“ My friend,” she told him, “ I release you from your oath.”

Balthazar gazed at her in astonishment.

“ Are you thinking of your experiments ? ” she went on.

He answered by a gesture of fearful energy. Far from remonstrating, Mme Claes, who had plumbed at leisure the abyss into which they were both about to fall, took his hand and grasped it smiling.

“ Thanks, friend, I am sure of my power,” said she ; “ you sacrificed to me more than your life. For me now the sacrifices ! Although I’ve already sold some of my diamonds there still remain enough of them, when added to my brother’s to procure you the money needed for your work. I intended those parures for our daughters ; but will not your fame make more glittering

128 The Tragedy of a Genius

ones for them? Besides, will you not one day give them back diamonds more beautiful?"

The joy that suddenly lit up her husband's face set the crown on Joséphine's despair; she saw with grief that the man's passion was too strong for him. Claes had confidence in his work, so that he walked without trembling in a path which to his wife were an abyss. He had the faith, she the doubt, she the heavier burden; does not a woman always suffer for two? At that moment she was pleased to believe in success, wanting to justify to herself her complicity in the probable dilapidation of their fortune.

"My whole life's love would not suffice in recognition of your self-sacrifice, Pépita," said Claes affectionately.

Scarce had he ended the words when Marguerite and Félicie entered and wished them good morning. Mme Claes lowered her eyes and remained an instant dumbfounded before her two daughters, whose fortune had just been alienated for a chimera; whilst her husband took them on his knees and chatted gaily with them, happy at being able to pour out the joy that was oppressing him.

Mme Claes entered into her husband's ardent life from that time. Her children's future, their father's fame were to her two motives as powerful as glory and science were to Claes. Accordingly the unlucky woman had not an hour's calm, when all the diamonds of the family were sold in Paris, by the medium of the Abbé de Solis, her

The Tragedy of a Genius 129

confessor, and when the chemical manufacturers had begun again sending their goods. Unceasingly agitated by the demon of science and by the fury of investigation which devoured her husband, she lived in continual expectation and remained like dead for entire days, nailed to her easy chair by the very violence of her desires, which, not finding like Balthazar a pasture-ground in laboratory labours, tortured her soul by acting on her doubts and fears. At moments reproaching herself for her complaisance in a passion whose goal was impossible and which M. de Solis condemned, she got up, went to the window of the interior court and beheld in terror the laboratory chimney. If any smoke escaped from it she watched it in despair, the most contrary ideas agitated her heart and mind. She saw fleeing away in smoke her children's fortune, but she was saving their father's life ; was it not her first duty to make him happy ? This last thought calmed her for a moment.

She had gained her point as to entering the laboratory and remaining there ; but she had soon to give up that mournful gratification. She experienced there too lively sufferings at seeing Balthazar not troubling about her, and even often appearing embarrassed by her presence ; she there endured jealous impatiences, cruel longings to blow up the house ; she died there of a thousand unheard-of ills. Lemulquinier then became for her a species of barometer ; if she heard him whistle as he went to and fro to serve break-

130 The Tragedy of a Genius

fast or dinner she guessed that her husband's experiences had been lucky and that he conceived the hope of an early success; if Lemulquinier was dull, gloomy, she cast at him a look of pain; Balthazar was discontented. Mistress and valet had ended by understanding each other, despite the pride of the one and the cunning submissive-ness of the other.

Feeble and defenceless against the frightful prostrations of thought, the woman succumbed beneath those alternatives of hope and despair which were made heavier for her by the inquietudes of the loving wife and the anxieties of the mother trembling for her family. The desolating silence that once froze her heart she shared without noticing the sombre look of the house, and the entire days which flowed by in the parlour, without a smile, often without a word. With sad motherly foresight she accustomed her daughters to household work, and tried to make them skilful enough at some woman's trade for them to be able to make a living by it should they fall into poverty. The house-calm therefore covered fearful agitations. Towards the end of the summer Balthazar had devoured the money from the sale of the diamonds in Paris through the medium of old Abbé de Solis, and was indebted for twenty thousand francs to Protez et Chiffreville.

In August, 1813, about a year after the scene at the beginning of the story, though Claes had made some fine experiments, which unhappily he

The Tragedy of a Genius 131

despised, his efforts had been resultless as to the principal object of his researches. The day on which he finished the series of his operations the sense of his impotence crushed him; the certainty of having vainly dissipated considerable sums of money made him desperate. It was a fearful catastrophe. He left the attic, went slowly down to the parlour, threw himself into a chair among his children, and remained there as if dead for some instants, without answering the questions showered on him by his wife: tears overcame him, he flew to his room not to show his grief publicly. Joséphine followed and drew him into her room where Balthazar alone with her allowed his despair to burst forth.

These tears on the part of a man, these words of *an artist in despair, the regrets of the father* had a stamp of terror, tenderness, madness, which hurt Mme Claes more than all her past griefs. The victim comforted the executioner. When Balthazar said with a fearful accent of conviction: "I'm a wretch, I'm playing with my children's lives, with yours, and in order to leave you happy I must kill myself!" the speech cut her to the quick, and the knowledge she had of her husband's character causing her to fear lest he should at once realise that vow of despair, she experienced one of those revolutions that trouble life at its source and which was the more deadly because Pépita controlled the violent effects by simulating a mendacious calm.

132 The Tragedy of a Genius

"My friend," answered she, "I've consulted not Pierquin, whose friendship is not so great that he does not feel some secret pleasure in seeing us ruined, but an old man who shows himself to me as good as a father. The Abbé de Solis, my confessor, has given me a piece of advice which is saving us from ruin. He came to see your pictures. The value of those in the gallery may serve to pay all the sums mortgaged on your properties, and what you owe Protez et Chiffreville; for no doubt you have an account to settle there?"

Claes made an affirmative sign by lowering his head, whose hair had become white.

"M. de Solis knows Messrs. Happe and Dunccker of Amsterdam; they are mad on pictures and jealous like parvenus to display a fastidious taste which is only permitted ancient families; they will pay the whole value for our pictures. Thus we shall recover our revenues, and you will be able, out of the price, which will approach a hundred thousand ducats, to take a portion of the capital to continue your experiments. Your daughters and I shall be content with little. With time and economy we shall replace the empty frames with other pictures, and you will live happy!"

Balthazar raised his head towards his wife with a joy blent with fear. The rôles were changed. The wife became the husband's protector. This man, so tender, and whose heart beat so intimately with Joséphine's, held her in his arms without

The Tragedy of a Genius 133

noticing the horrible convulsion that made her throb, that shook her hair and lips with a nervous quivering.

"I didn't dare tell you that between me and the absolute there is scarcely a hair's-breadth of distance. In order to gasify the metals I have only to find a means of submitting them to an immense heat in an environment where the pressure of the air is null, in fact in an absolute void."

Mme Claes could not endure the selfishness of this reply. She expected passionate thanks for her sacrifices, and found a chemistry problem. She suddenly left her husband, went down to the parlour, fell into a chair between her frightened daughters and burst into tears. Marguerite and Félicie each took one of her hands, knelt down on each side of the chair crying like herself, without knowing the cause of her distress, and asked her several times :

"What's the matter, my mother ? "

"Poor children ! I am dead, I feel it."

The reply sent a shudder through Marguerite, who perceived for the first time on her mother's face the marks of the pallor peculiar to persons whose colour is brown.

"Martha ! Martha !" cried Félicie. "Come, mama wants you."

The old dame ran up from the kitchen, and seeing the green whiteness of the face which was slightly bistre and so vigorously coloured :

134 The Tragedy of a Genius

"Body of Christ!" she cried in Spanish.
"Madame is dying."

She went out hurriedly, told Josette to get water warm for a foot-bath and returned to her mistress.

"Don't frighten the master; tell him nothing, Martha," cried Mme Claes. "Poor dear girls," she added, pressing Marguerite and Félicie to her heart with a despairing movement, "I wish I could live long enough to see you happy and married.—Martha," she went on, "tell Lemulquinier to go to M. de Solis and ask him from me to come here."

X

THIS thunderbolt necessarily had its repercussion also in the kitchen. Josette and Martha, both devoted to Mme Claes and her daughters, were hit in the sole affection they had ! Those terrible words, " Mme Claes is dying, the master will have killed her ! Get ready sharp a mustard foot-bath ! " had drawn forth several interjective phrases from Josette, who overwhelmed Lemulquinier with them. Lemulquinier, cold and insensible, was eating at the table corner before one of the windows by which light came from the court into the kitchen, where everything was as clean as in a lady's boudoir.

" It was bound to end like that," said Josette, looking at the valet and getting on a stool, in order to take down on a shelf a caldron that shone like gold. " There's no mother who could see with coolness a father amusing himself by chucking away a fortune like master's, in order to play ducks and drakes with it."

Josette, whose head, coifed in a round cap with ruches, resembled that of a German peasant cast at Lemulquinier a sour look, which the green hue of her small deep-set eyes rendered well-nigh venomous. The old valet shrugged his

136 The Tragedy of a Genius

shoulders with a movement worthy of an impatient Mirabeau, and then he packed into his big mouth a slice of bread and butter tartine on which were sprinkled some preserves.

"Instead of worrying Monsieur, Madame ought to give him money; we should soon be rich. Enough to swim in gold! We're only the thickness of a threepenny-bit from discovering——"

"Well! you who have twenty thousand francs deposited, why not offer them to master? He's your master! And since you're so sure of his goings-on——"

"You know nothing about it, Josette. Warm your water," replied the Fleming, interrupting the cook.

"I know enough to know there were a thousand marks' worth of plate here which you and your master have melted away, and which if you are let go your ways you'll succeed so well in making five sous into six blanks that there'll soon be nothing."

"And," said Martha, chiming in, "Monsieur will kill Madame to get rid of a woman who restrains him and prevents him from swallowing everything. He's possessed by the devil, that's clear!—The least you risk by helping him, Lemulquinier, is your soul, if you've got one; for you're there like a lump of ice whilst everything here is in desolation. The young ladies are crying like Magdalens. So run for M. l'Abbé de Solis!"

"I have business to do for Monsieur, to arrange

The Tragedy of a Genius 137

the laboratory," said the valet. "It's too far from here to the Quartier d'Esquerchin. Go there yourself."

"Look at that monster!" said Martha. "Who'll give Madame the foot-bath? Would you let her die? She's got the blood in the head——"

"Mulquinier," said Marguerite, coming into the room preceding the kitchen, "when returning from M. de Solis you'll beg M. Pierquin, the doctor, to come here quickly."

"Hein! you'll go," said Josette.

"Mademoiselle, Monsieur told me to arrange his laboratory," answered Lemulquinier, turning towards the two women whom he regarded with a despotic air.

"Father," said Marguerite to M. Claes, who was coming down at the moment, "can't you leave us Mulquinier for an errand to the town?"

"You'll go, you wretched Chinaman!" said Martha, hearing M. Claes place Lemulquinier at his daughter's orders.

The valet's small amount of devotion to the house was the great subject of quarrel between these two women and Lemulquinier, whose coldness had had as a result the exalting of the attachment of Josette and the duenna. This strife, so sordid in appearance, had much influence on the family's future, when later it had need of succour against misfortune. Balthazar became again so abstracted that he did not observe Joséphine's condition of illness. He took Jean on his knees and

138 The Tragedy of a Genius

mechanically made him jump, whilst thinking of the problem he had from that time the possibility of solving. He saw the foot-bath carried to his wife, who, not having the strength to rise from the chair in which she lay, had remained in the parlour. He even gazed at his daughters busied with their mother, without inquiring the cause of their anxious care.

When Marguerite or Jean wanted to speak Mme Claes asked for silence by pointing to Balthazar. A scene like that was of a nature to make Marguerite think, who, placed between her father and mother, was already old enough, reasonable enough to appreciate their conduct. There comes a moment in the inward life of families when the children voluntarily or involuntarily become their parents' judges. Mme Claes had grasped the danger of the situation. Out of love for Balthazar she compelled herself to justify in Marguerite's eyes what to the just mind of a girl of sixteen might appear faults in a father. Likewise the deep respect shown in these circumstances by Mme Claes for Balthazar, by effacing herself before him so as not to disturb his meditations, impressed on his children a sort of terror at the paternal majesty.

This devotion, however, though contagious, enhanced yet more the admiration of Marguerite for her mother, to whom the daily accidents of life united her more particularly. The sentiment was based on a kind of divining of the sufferings whose

The Tragedy of a Genius 139

cause was naturally bound to preoccupy a young woman. No human power could prevent a word sometimes escaping from Martha or Josette which disclosed the origin of the position of the family for four years. Therefore, despite Mme Claes's discretion her daughter gradually, slowly discovered, thread by thread, the mysterious woof of this domestic drama.

Marguerite in a given time would be her mother's active confidante, and would be finally the most daunting of judges. So all Mme Claes's care was directed to Marguerite, to whom she tried to communicate her attachment to Balthazar. The firmness, the reasoning she encountered in her daughter made her shiver at the idea of a possible struggle between Marguerite and Balthazar, when after her own death she was replaced by her in the interior management of the house. The poor woman had actually come to tremble more for the consequences of her death than for her death itself.

Her solicitude for Balthazar burst to view in the resolution she had just taken. By freeing her husband's property she assured his independence and anticipated any discussion by separating his interests from his children's ; she hoped to see him happy up to the moment she closed her eyes ; then she reckoned on transmitting the delicacies of her heart to Marguerite, who would go on playing with him the part of an angel of love, whilst using with the family a tutelary and conservative authority.

140 The Tragedy of a Genius

Was it not making her love shine even from the bottom of the grave on those dear to her? Nevertheless she did not want to derogate from the father in the daughter's eyes by initiating her before the time into the terrors which Balthazar's passion for science inspired in her; she studied Marguerite's soul and character to know if the young woman would of herself become a mother to her brothers and sister, to her father a sweet and tender woman.

So Mme Claes's last days were poisoned by calculations and fears she did not dare to confide to anyone. Feeling herself touched in the very quick of life by that last scene, she cast glances right into the future; whilst Balthazar, blind thenceforth to all that was economy, fortune, domestic feelings, was thinking of finding the absolute. The deep silence reigning in the parlour was only broken by the monotonous motion of Claes's foot; he continued moving it without noticing that Jean had got off it. Sitting near her mother, whose pale and distorted face she watched, Marguerite turned from time to time to her father, astounded at his insensibility. Soon the street door banged as it shut and the family saw the Abbé de Solis leaning on his nephew, both of them slowly crossing the court.

"Ah! here's M. Emmanuel," said Félicie.

"The kind young man!" said Mme Claes on perceiving Emmanuel de Solis. "I have pleasure in seeing him again."

The Tragedy of a Genius 141

Marguerite blushed on hearing her mother's praise. Since two days the sight of the young man had awakened unknown feelings in her heart and excited in her intelligence thoughts till then dormant. During the confessor's visit to his penitent there had happened those imperceptible events which hold much room in life, and whose results were important enough to require here the portrayal of the two new personages introduced into the bosom of the family. Mme Claes made it a principle to perform her acts of devotion in private. Her director, almost unknown at her house, was appearing now for the second time ; but, there as elsewhere, one could not help being seized by a sort of affection and admiration at the sight of uncle and nephew. The Abbé de Solis, a silvery-haired octogenarian, had a decrepit face in which the life seemed to have withdrawn into his eyes. He walked with difficulty, for one of his short legs ended in a horribly deformed foot, kept in a kind of velvet bag which obliged him to use a crutch when he was without his nephew's arm. His bent back, his dried-up body betrayed a suffering, fragile nature dominated by an iron will and a chaste religious spirit which had preserved him.

This Spanish priest, notable for vast knowledge, for true piety, for very wide erudition, had been successively a Dominican, Grand Penitentiary of Toledo, and Vicar-General of the archbishopric of Malines. Had it not been for the French

142 The Tragedy of a Genius

Revolution the patronage of the Casa-Réals would have borne him to the highest dignities of the Church ; but his grief at the death of the young duke, his pupil, disgusted him with active life and he consecrated himself wholly to the education of his nephew, an orphan at a very early age. At the time of the conquest of Belgium he had settled near Mme Claes. From his youth the Abbé de Solis had professed for St. Theresa an enthusiasm which, as much as his mental bent, led him towards the mystical part of Christianity. On finding in Flanders, where Mlle Bourignon, as well as the illuminist and quietist writers, made most proselytes, a band of Catholics given over to his beliefs, he remained the more readily as he was considered there a patriarch by that particular communion in which followers continue to obey the doctrines of the mystics, despite the censures that struck down Fénelon and Mme Guyon.

His way of living was strict, his life was exemplary and he was said to have ecstasies. Despite the attachment which so severe a religious was bound to practise towards the things of this world, the affection he bore his nephew made him careful of his interests. When it was a question of a work of charity the old man laid the faithful of his Church under contribution before having recourse to his own fortune, and his patriarchal authority was so well recognised, his intentions were so pure, his perspicacity so seldom at fault, that everyone

The Tragedy of a Genius 143

honoured his demands. To have a notion of the contrast between uncle and nephew you would have to compare the old man to one of those unsubstantial willows that grow beside waters, and the young man to an eglantine laden with roses, whose elegant straight stem rises up from the bosom of the mossy tree, which it seems to want to set upright.

Severely brought up by his uncle, who kept him near himself just as a matron guards a virgin, Emmanuel was full of that delicate sensibility, of that half-dreamy candour, which are passing flowers of every youth, but novice in souls nurtured on religious principles. The old priest had suppressed the expression of voluptuous sentiments in his pupil, by preparing him for the sufferings of life by continual labours, by an almost cloistral discipline. Such education, which was bound to hand over Emmanuel quite fresh to the world and make him happy if he had good fortune in his first affections, had clothed him with an angelic purity which communicated to his person the charm with which young women are invested. His eyes, which were shy but backed by a strong and courageous soul, cast a light that vibrated in the soul like the sound of crystal spreads its undulations in the hearing. His face, expressive though regular, was recommended by a great precision in the contours, by the happy disposition of the lines and by the deep calm given by peace in the heart. Everything there was harmonious. His black hair, his brown eyes and eyebrows, heightened

144 The Tragedy of a Genius

yet more a white complexion and vivid colouring. His voice was what one would expect from so handsome a face. His feminine movements agreed with the melody of his voice, with the tender clearness of his glance. He seemed to ignore the attraction excited by the half-melancholy reserve of his attitude, the restraint of his speech and the respectful care he lavished on his uncle.

To see him studying the old Abbé's tortuous walk so as to lend himself to his painful windings in such a manner as not to thwart them, looking out afar off at what might hurt his feet and leading him into a better path, it was impossible not to recognise in Emmanuel the generous feelings which make a sublime creature of man. He seemed so great, loving his uncle without judging him, obeying him without ever discussing his orders, that everybody thought they could see a predestination in the suave name his stepmother had given him. When, either in his own place or at others' houses, the old man used his despotism as a Dominican, Emmanuel sometimes lifted his head so nobly, as if to make a forcible protest that he should find himself at grips with another man, that persons of heart were moved as artists are at the sight of a great work, for beautiful feelings do not ring less loudly in the soul by means of living conceptions than by the realisations of art!

Emmanuel had escorted his uncle when he had visited his penitent to examine the pictures of Claes House. On learning from Martha that

The Tragedy of a Genius 145

the Abbé de Solis was in the gallery, Marguerite, who desired to see the famous man, had found some mendacious pretext for rejoining her mother in order to gratify her curiosity. Entering quite jauntily, affecting the frivolity under which young women hide their longings so well, she had encountered Emmanuel's fresh, delicious face near the old man, who was dressed in black, bent, downcast, cadaverous.

The equally youthful, equally simple-minded glances of those two beings had expressed the same astonishment. Emmanuel and Marguerite had doubtless already seen each other in their dreams. They both lowered their eyes and then raised them again with an identical movement, allowing an identical confession to escape. Marguerite took her mother's arm, whispered to her to maintain appearances, and sheltered, so to speak, under the maternal wing, stretching out her neck with a swan's movement to look again at Emmanuel who for his part remained attached to his uncle's arm. Although skilfully distributed so as to give each canvas its value, the weak light in the gallery favoured the furtive glances which are the joy of shy people.

Doubtless neither of them went even in thought as far as the "yes" with which the passions begin, but both felt the deep trouble which stirs the heart and about which when youthful we keep the secret to ourselves from delicacy or from shamefacedness. The first impression which

146 The Tragedy of a Genius

determines the overflowings of a long-repressed sensibility is followed in all young people by the half-stupid astonishment produced in children by the first sounds of music. Among children some laugh and think, others only laugh after thinking ; but those whose soul is called to live on poesy or love listen long and ask again for the melody by a look in which pleasure is already alight, in which curiosity about the infinite is awakened. If we love irresistibly the places where in our childhood we were initiated into the beauties of harmony, if we remember with delight both the musician and even the instrument, how defend oneself against loving the being who first reveals to us the music of life ? Is not the first heart in which we have inspired love like a fatherland ? Emmanuel and Marguerite were one to the other that musical voice which awakens a sense, that hand which lifts cloudy veils and shows the banks bathed in the fires of the meridian.

When Mme Claes stopped the old man before a picture of Guido representing an angel, Marguerite put forward her head to see what Emmanuel's impression would be, and the young man looked for Marguerite to compare the dumb idea of the canvas with the living idea of the created being. This involuntary and ravishing flattery was understood and appreciated. The old Abbé gravely praised the fine composition and Mme Claes replied ; but the two children were silent. Such was their meeting. The mysterious light

The Tragedy of a Genius 147

in the gallery, the peace in the house, the presence of the parents, all contributed to engrave deeper in the heart the delicate features of this vaporous mirage. The thousand confused thoughts which had just assailed Marguerite grew calm, made a kind of limpid expanse in her soul and died away in a luminous ray when Emmanuel stammered some phrases as he took leave of Mme Claes. His voice, whose fresh, velvety timbre wove incredible spells in the heart, completed the sudden revelation caused by Emmanuel which he was to develop to his own profit ; for the man who is used by fate to awaken love in a young woman's heart often does not know his work and then leaves it incomplete. Marguerite bowed in utter confusion, and concentrated her good-bye in a look in which seemed to be portrayed her regret at losing that pure and charming vision. Like the child she wanted her tune again. The good-bye was said at the bottom of the old staircase before the parlour door ; and when she entered it she watched uncle and nephew till the street door had shut.

Mme Claes had been too much occupied by the serious subjects discussed in the consultation with her confessor to have been able to examine her daughter's face. At the moment when M. de Solis and his nephew appeared for the second time, she was still too violently troubled to notice the blush that reddened Marguerite's visage, revealing the fermentations of the first pleasure received in a virgin heart. When the old Abbé was announced

148 The Tragedy of a Genius

Marguerite had taken up her work again and seemed to bestow so much attention on it that she greeted the uncle and nephew without looking at them. M. Claes mechanically returned the Abbé de Solis's greeting and left the parlour like a man hurried away on business.

XI

THE pious Dominican sat by his penitent bestowing on her one of those deep looks by which he sounded souls ; it had sufficed him to see M. Claes and his wife to divine a catastrophe.

"Children," said the mother, "go into the garden. Marguerite, show Emmanuel your father's tulips."

Marguerite, half ashamed, took Félicie's arm, glanced at the young man, who reddened and went out of the parlour, seizing hold of Jean to keep himself in countenance. When they were all four in the garden Félicie and Jean went their ways, quitted Marguerite, who, left almost alone with young de Solis, took him to the bush of tulips invariably arranged in the same fashion every year by Lemulquinier.

"Do you like tulips?" asked Marguerite, after remaining a while in the profoundest silence without Emmanuel appearing to wish to break it.

"Mademoiselle, they are lovely flowers, but to like them one must have the taste for them, be able to appreciate their beauties. Such flowers dazzle me. The habit of working in my small

150 The Tragedy of a Genius

dull room near my uncle makes me doubtless prefer what is soft to the view."

Saying which last words he stared at Marguerite, but without his look, full of confused longings, containing any allusion to the even whiteness, the calm, the tender colours, that made the face a flower.

"So you work a great deal?" rejoined Marguerite, guiding Emmanuel to a wooden bench with a green-painted back. "From here," she said, continuing, "you won't see the tulips so near, they will tire your eyes less. You're right, those colours flicker and make one feel bad."

"Yes, I work a good deal!" answered the young man after a moment's silence, during which he had levelled the sand of the alley under his feet. "I work at all kinds of things. My uncle wanted to make a priest of me——"

"Oh!" cried Marguerite naively.

"I resisted, I didn't feel any vocation. But I had to summon up much courage to contradict my uncle's desires. He is so good, he loves me so much! He lately bought a substitute for me to save me, a poor orphan, from conscription——"

"What then is your life-work?" inquired Marguerite, who seemed to want to take back her phrase by making a gesture, and added: "Forgive me, sir, you must find me very inquisitive!"

The Tragedy of a Genius 151

"Oh! Mademoiselle," said Emmanuel, gazing at her with as much admiration as tenderness, "nobody except my uncle has yet put me that question. I study to be a professor. What's to be done? I'm not rich. If I can become principal of a college in Flanders, I'll have enough to live on modestly, and I'll marry some simple woman whom I shall love well. Such is the life I have in prospect. That's perhaps why I prefer a daisy on which everyone treads in the plain of Orchies to those beautiful tulips full of gold, purple, sapphires, emeralds, which represent a luxurious life, even as the daisy represents a gentle and patriarchal life, the life of the poor professor I shall be."

"I had always called up till now daisies marguerites," she said.

Emmanuel de Solis reddened exceedingly and sought for an answer, digging at the sand with his feet. Embarrassed to choose between all the ideas which came to him and which he thought silly, then, put out of countenance by the delay in his answering, he said:

"I didn't venture to utter your name——" and did not finish.

"Professor!" she resumed.

"Oh! Mademoiselle, I'll be a professor so as to have a business, but I'll undertake work which may make me more widely useful—I have much liking for historical works."

"Ah!"

152 The Tragedy of a Genius

That "Ah!" full of secret thoughts, made the young man still more shamefaced, and he began laughing sillily as he said :

"You make me speak of myself, Mademoiselle. I ought only to speak to you about yourself."

"My mother and your uncle have, I believe, finished their talk," she said, looking through the windows into the parlour.

"I found your mother much altered."

"She suffers without wanting to tell us the subject of her sufferings, and we can only sympathise in her sorrows."

Mme Claes had indeed just ended a delicate consultation in which it was a question of a case of conscience which the Abbé de Solis alone could decide. Foreseeing complete ruin she wanted to retain unknown to Balthazar, who troubled little about his affairs, a considerable sum of money on the price of the pictures which M. de Solis charged himself with selling in Holland, in order to hide and reserve it for the time when poverty should weigh on the family. After ripe deliberation and after appreciating the circumstances of his penitent, the old Dominican had approved this act of prudence.

He went off to busy himself about the sale which had to take place secretly so as not to injure too much M. Claes's reputation. The old man sent his nephew fortified with a letter of recommendation to Amsterdam, where the young man, en-

The Tragedy of a Genius 153

chanted at doing a service to the Claes family, succeeded in selling the gallery pictures to the famous bankers, Happe and Duncker, for an ostensible sum of eighty-five thousand Dutch ducats, and a sum of fifteen thousand more, which were to be secretly handed to Mme Claes. The pictures were so well known that to clinch the bargain all that was needed was Balthazar's answer to the letter written him by the firm of Happe and Duncker. Emmanuel de Solis was commissioned by Claes to receive the price of the pictures, which he dispatched secretly to him so as to keep the town of Douai in ignorance of the sale.

Towards the end of September Balthazar repaid the sums lent him, freed his property and resumed his work ; but Claes House had been despoiled of its finest ornament. Blinded by his passion he did not betray a single regret ; he thought himself so sure of being able to repair the loss promptly that he had had the sale concluded with right of redemption. A hundred painted canvases were nothing in Joséphine's eyes compared with home happiness and her husband's content ; besides, she had the gallery filled with the pictures that furnished the reception-rooms, and in order to hide the void they left in the front house she changed the furnishing arrangements. His debts paid, Balthazar had about two hundred thousand francs at his disposal to recommence his experiments. The Abbé de Solis and his nephew were the depositaries of

154 The Tragedy of a Genius

the fifteen thousand ducats reserved by Mme Claes. In order to increase the amount the Abbé sold the ducats, to which the events of the continental war had given values. One hundred and sixty-six thousand francs in crowns were buried in the cellar of the Abbé's house.

Mme Claes had the sad happiness to see her husband constantly busy during nearly eight months. Nevertheless, too cruelly injured by the blow he had given her, she fell into a languorous illness, which was necessarily bound to get worse. Science devoured Balthazar so completely that neither the French reverses nor Napoleon's first fall nor the Bourbon's return drew him from his occupations ; he was neither husband, father, nor citizen, he was a chemist.

Towards the end of 1814 Mme Claes had reached a stage of consumption which no longer allowed her to leave her bed. Not wishing to vegetate in her room, where she had lived happily, where the memories of her past happiness would have inspired her with involuntary comparisons with the present that would have crushed her, she remained in the parlour. The doctors had favoured her heart's desire by finding the room more airy, more cheerful and more suitable to her condition than her own room. The bed on which the unfortunate woman ceased living was drawn up between the chimneypiece and the window giving on to the garden. She passed her last days there, holily occupied in perfecting the souls of her daughters,

The Tragedy of a Genius 155

on whom she was pleased to let the fire of her own soul beam.

Conjugal love being weakened in its manifestations permitted maternal love to expand. The mother showed herself the more charming because she had delayed in being so. Like all generous persons she experienced lofty delicacies of feeling which she took for remorse. Believing she had robbed her children of some due marks of affection she tried to redeem her imaginary wrongs and showed them attentions, loving care, which made her a source of rapture to them; she wished in some sort to make them live at her very heart, to cover them with her failing wings and to love them in one single day in return for all those in which she had neglected them. Suffering gave her caresses, her speech an unctuous warmth which exhaled from her soul. Her eyes caressed her children before her voice stirred them by intonations full of wishings, and her hand seemed to be ever showering blessings on them.

If after resuming its habits of luxury, Claes House soon received nobody, if its isolation became again more complete, if Balthazar no longer gave a party on his marriage anniversary, the town of Douai was not surprised. First of all Mme Claes's illness seemed a sufficient reason for the change, then the payment of the debts stopped slanderous gossip, finally the political vicissitudes to which Flanders was subjected, the Hundred Days' War, the foreign occupation, caused

156 The Tragedy of a Genius

the chemist to be quite forgotten. During those two years the town was so often on the point of being taken, so consecutively occupied either by Frenchmen or foes ; so many foreigners came there, so many country-folk took refuge there, and there were so many interests involved, so many existences called in question, so many movements and disasters, that each one had to think for himself alone.

The Abbé de Solis and his nephew, the two brothers Pierquin being the only persons who came and visited Mme Claes, the winter of 1814 to 1815 was for her the most painful of agonies. Her husband seldom came to see her. After dinner he certainly stayed a few hours near her ; but as she had no longer the strength to carry on a long conversation he would utter one or two eternally similar phrases, would sit down, be silent and let a fearful silence reign in the parlour. This monotony was diversified on the days when the Abbé de Solis and his nephew passed the evening at Claes House. Whilst the old Abbé played trictrac with Balthazar, Marguerite talked with Emmanuel, by her mother's bedside, who smiled at their innocent joys without letting the couple see how both painful and consoling to her crushed soul was the fresh breeze of those virginal loves overflowing in waves and word to word. The inflexion of voice which charmed these two children broke her heart, a glance of understanding surprised between them threw her back, half dead

The Tragedy of a Genius 157

though she was, into memories of her young and happy hours that gave the present its full bitterness. Emmanuel and Marguerite had a delicacy which made them repress love's delicious childishnesses, so as not to offend by them an afflicted woman whose wounds were instinctively divined by them.

Nobody has yet observed that the feelings have a life peculiar to them, a nature which proceeds from the circumstances amid which they are born ; they keep both the physiognomy of the places where they grew up and the impress of the ideas which influenced their developments. There are passions ardently conceived that remain ardent, like Mme Claes's for her husband ; then there are feelings to which everything has smiled, which preserve a morning cheerfulness, their harvests of joy never pass without laughter and festivals ; but there are also encountered loves fatally framed in melancholy or encircled by misfortune, whose pleasures are painful, costly, laden with fears, poisoned by remorse or full of despair. The love buried in Emmanuel's and Marguerite's hearts, without either one or the other yet understanding that love was in question ; that sentiment blossoming forth under the sombre vault of the Claes gallery, in the presence of a strict old Abbé, in a moment of silence and calm ; that love, grave and discreet but fertile in soft shades, in secret pleasures enjoyed like grapes stolen at the corner of a vine, underwent the

158 The Tragedy of a Genius

brown colour, the grey hues which adorned it at its earliest hours.

Whilst not venturing to make any lively demonstration before the bed of grief, the two children unknowingly enhanced their enjoyments by a concentration which impressed them to the bottom of their hearts. It consisted in cares bestowed on the patient in which Emmanuel liked to share, happy to be able to join Marguerite in making himself in advance that mother's son. A melancholy form of thanks replaced lovers' honeyed language on the young woman's lips. The sighs of their hearts, filled with joy at some exchange of looks, were little distinguished from the sighs called forth by the spectacle of a mother's pain. Their good little moments of indirect confession, of unfulfilled promises, of restrained confidences, might be compared to the allegories painted by Raphael on black backgrounds. They had both a certitude which they did not avow; they knew the sun above them, but knew not what wind would dispel the big black clouds towering over their heads; they doubted the future, and fearing to be always escorted by sufferings they remained timidly in the twilight shadows without daring to say to each other: "Shall we finish the day together?"

Nevertheless the affection Mme Claes showed her children nobly concealed all that she kept silent about to herself. Her children caused her neither trembling nor terror, they were her con-

The Tragedy of a Genius 159

solation, but they were not her life ; she was living for them, she was dying for Balthazar. However painful to her might be the presence of her husband deep in thought for whole hours, who now and then threw her a weary look, she only forgot her pains during those cruel instants. Balthazar's indifference to the dying woman would have seemed criminal to any stranger who chanced to witness it ; but Mme Claes and her daughters were used to it, they knew the man's heart and acquitted him. If during the day Mme Claes underwent some dangerous crisis, if she was worse, if she seemed near dying, Claes was the only one in the house and town who knew it not ; his valet Lemulquinier knew it ; but neither the daughters on whom their mother enjoined silence nor his wife informed him of the dangers run by a creature once so ardently loved. When his step resounded in the gallery at the dinner-hour Mme Claes was happy ; she was about to see him, she gathered up again her strength to taste that joy.

On the instant he came in this woman, pale and half dead, coloured up vividly, reassumed a semblance of health ; the savant came near the bed, took her hand and beheld her under a false appearance ; for him alone she was well. When he asked, " My dear wife, how are you to-day ? " she answered, " Better, my friend ! " and induced the absent-minded man to believe that next day she would get up, be quite recovered. Balthazar's

160 The Tragedy of a Genius

preoccupation was so great that he accepted the malady of which his wife was dying as a simple indisposition. Moribund for all the world, she was alive for him.

A complete separation between the spouses was the outcome of the year. Claes slept far from his wife, got up at dawn and shut himself up in his laboratory or study; seeing her no longer but in the presence of his daughters or two or three friends who visited her, he dishabituated himself of her. These two beings once accustomed to think together had no longer, except at remote intervals, those moments of communicativeness, of abandon, of expansion which constitute heart-life, and the moment came when those rare pleasures ceased.

Physical sufferings came to the poor woman's succour and aided her to support a void, a separation which would have killed her had she been living. Such poignant pains did she undergo that she was at times glad not to make him witness them whom she ever loved. She watched Balthazar during a part of the evening, and knowing him happy as he wished to be she espoused the felicity she had procured him. That frail enjoyment sufficed her; she did not ask herself any more if she was loved, she tried to believe it, and glided over that bed of ice without daring to press, fearing to break it and drown her heart in a frightful annihilation. As no event troubled this calm and the illness

The Tragedy of a Genius 161

that slowly devoured Mme Claes contributed to the inward peace, maintaining conjugal affection in a passive state, it was easy to reach in this sorrowful condition the first days of the year 1816.

XII

TOWARDS the end of February Pierquin, the notary, contributed the blow which was destined to precipitate into the tomb an angelic woman, whose soul, said the Abbé de Solis, was almost without sin.

"Madame," he whispered in her ear, seizing at a moment when the daughters could not hear their talk, "M. Claes has charged me with borrowing three hundred thousand francs on his properties; take precautions for your children's fortune."

Mme Claes clasped her hands, raised her eyes to the ceiling and thanked the notary by a kindly nod and a sad smile, by which he was stirred.

That phrase was a dagger blow which killed Pépita. That day she was given over to painful reflections which had swelled her heart, and found herself in one of those situations in which a traveller, no longer possessing his equilibrium, rolls, pushed by a trifling pebble, right to the bottom of the precipice he has long and courageously negotiated. When the notary was gone Mme Claes got Marguerite to hand her everything needed for writing, gathered up her strength and

The Tragedy of a Genius 163

occupied herself for some instants with a testamentary document. She stopped several times to gaze at her daughter.

The hour of confessions had come. In managing the house since her mother's illness Marguerite had so well realised the dying woman's hopes that Mme Claes cast a glance without despair on the future of her family, seeing herself re-live in that strong, loving angel. Doubtless the two women had presentiment of sad mutual confidences to be exchanged, the daughter looked at her mother as soon as her mother looked at her, and both of them had tears in their eyes. Several times Marguerite at the moment when Mme Claes was resting said "Mother?"—as if to speak; then she stopped as if suffocated, without her mother, who was too busied with her last thoughts, asking her the reason of the query. At length Mme Claes wanted to seal her letter; Marguerite, who was holding a candle for her, withdrew out of discretion in order not to see the superscription.

"You may read, my child!" said the invalid to her in an agonised tone.

Marguerite saw her mother tracing the words: "To my daughter Marguerite."

"We'll talk when I have rested," she added, putting the letter under the pillow.

Then she fell back as if exhausted by her recent effort and slept for some hours. When she awoke, her daughters, her sons were kneeling at her bedside and praying fervently. It was a Thursday.

164 The Tragedy of a Genius

Gabriel and Jean had just come from college with Emmanuel de Solis, who had been appointed six months since professor of history and philosophy.

"Dear children, we must say good-bye to each other," she cried. "You don't desert me, you! and he whom——"

She did not finish.

"M. Emmanuel," said Marguerite, seeing her mother grow pale, "tell father mama feels worse."

Young Solis went up to the laboratory, and after getting permission from Lemulquinier that Balthazar should come and speak with him, the latter replied to the young man's urgent request :

"I'm coming."

"My friend," said Mme Claes to Emmanuel on his return, "take my sons with you and fetch your uncle. It is necessary, I believe, to give me the last sacraments ; I would receive them from his hand."

When she was alone with her daughters she beckoned to Marguerite, who, understanding her, sent Félicie away.

"I too had to speak to you, my dear mama," said Marguerite, who, not thinking her mother as ill as she was, enlarged the wound caused by Pierquin. "Since ten days I've had no money for household expenses and I owe the servants six months' wages. I already intended twice to ask father for money and didn't dare. You don't

The Tragedy of a Genius 165

know ! The gallery pictures and the cellar have been sold——”

“ He told me no word of all that ! ” cried Mme Claes. “ Oh, my God ! You are recalling me to you in good time. My poor children, what will become of you ? ”

She offered up an ardent prayer which lit up her eyes with the fires of repentance.

“ Marguerite,” she went on, pulling the letter from under the pillow, “ here is a document which you will not open or read except at the moment when after my death you are in the greatest distress, i.e. if you lack bread here. My dear Marguerite, love your father well, but have care of your sister and brothers. In a few days, in a few hours perhaps, you will be the head of the family ! Be economical.

“ If you find yourself opposed to your father’s wishes, and the case might occur, as he has spent large sums in delving after a secret whose discovery is certain to be the object of immense renown and wealth, he will doubtless want money, perhaps he’ll ask you for it ; then display all a daughter’s affection, and try to conciliate the interests of which you will be the sole protectress with what you owe to a father, to a great man who is sacrificing his happiness, his life, to the future fame of his family ; he could not be wrong but in the form, his intentions will always be noble, he is so excellent, his heart is full of love ; you will see him again kind and affectionate, you will ! I had to

166 The Tragedy of a Genius

tell you this at the edge of the grave, Marguerite. If you wish to soothe my death-pangs, you will promise, my child, to replace me with your father, not to cause him any chagrin ; reproach him with nothing ; don't judge him ! In fine, be a gentle and obliging mediator until, his work being ended, he becomes again the head of the family."

"I understand you, darling mother," said Marguerite, kissing the dying woman's inflamed eyes, "and I shall do as you wish."

"Don't marry, my angel," went on Mme Claes, "except when Gabriel can succeed you in the management of affairs and of the house. Your husband, if you married, would perhaps not share your feelings, would cast trouble into the family and torment your father."

Marguerite looked at her mother and said :

"Have you no other advice to give me about my marriage ?"

"Do you hesitate, my dear child ?" said the dying woman in affright.

"No," she answered. "I promise to obey you."

"Poor girl, I could not sacrifice myself for you," added the mother, shedding hot tears, "and I ask you to sacrifice yourself for all ! Happiness makes one selfish. Yes, Marguerite, I've been weak because I was happy. Be strong, keep some reason for those who will have none here. Act so that your brothers, your sister never accuse me. Love your father well, but don't thwart him—too much."

The Tragedy of a Genius 167

She leant her head on the pillow and added not a word—her strength had given out. The inward strife between wife and mother had been too violent. Some instants after, the clergy came, preceded by the Abbé de Solis, and the parlour was filled with the people of the house. When the ceremony began Mme Claes, whom her confessor had awakened, looked at all the persons around her and did not see Balthazar.

“And Monsieur?” she said.

That phrase, in which both her life and death were summed up, was uttered in so lamentable a tone that it caused a horrible shudder in the gathering. Despite her great age Martha darted out like an arrow, mounted the stairs and knocked roughly at the laboratory door.

“Monsieur, Madame is dying and they’re waiting for you to administer it,” she cried with the violence of indignation.

“I’m coming down,” answered Balthazar.

Lemulquinier came a moment later, saying his master was following him. Mme Claes did not cease gazing at the parlour door; but her husband only appeared at the moment the ceremony was over. The Abbé de Solis and the children surrounded the dying woman’s bed. On seeing her husband enter Joséphine reddened and some tears rolled down her cheeks.

“*Doubtless you were on the point of decomposing azote?*” she said to him with the gentleness of an angel, which made those by the bed shudder.

168 The Tragedy of a Genius

"It's done!" he cried with a joyous air. "Azote contains oxygen and a substance of the nature of the imponderables which is probably the principle of——"

Murmurs of horror arose which interrupted him and restored his presence of mind.

"What have they told me?" he went on. "Are you worse?—What's happened?"

"It happens, sir," the Abbé de Solis indignantly whispered in his ear, "that your wife's dying and you've killed her!"

Without awaiting a reply the Abbé de Solis took Emmanuel's arm and went out, followed by the children, who escorted him as far as the court. Balthazar remained as if lightning-struck and stared at his wife with some tears falling.

"You're dying and I've killed you!" he exclaimed. "What does he mean?"

"My friend," she replied, "I only lived by your love, and you have unwittingly withdrawn my life from me."

"Leave us alone," said Claes as the children came in. "Have I indeed stopped loving you a single moment?" he went on, sitting by his wife's bed and taking her hands, which he kissed.

"My friend, I shall not blame you at all. You have made me happy, too happy; I have been unable to endure the comparison between the first days of our marriage, which were full, and these last days, during which you've no longer been

The Tragedy of a Genius 169

yourself and which have been empty. Heart-life like physical life has its actions. For six years you've been dead to love, to family, to all that constituted our happiness. I shall not talk to you of the felicities which are youth's appanage, they're bound to cease in the late season of life ; but they leave fruits on which souls feed, a boundless confidence, sweet customs ; well, you ravished me of those treasures of our age. I'm going in good time ; we are not living together in any way, you hid from me your thoughts and your acts.

“ How is it you've come to fear me ? Have I ever addressed you a word, a look, a gesture impressed with blame ? Well, you've sold your last pictures, you've sold even the wines in your cellar, and you're borrowing afresh on your property without telling me a word !—Ah ! so I shall leave life disgusted at life. If you commit fault, if you blind yourself in pursuing the impossible, have I not shown there was love enough in me to find sweetness in sharing your faults, to always walk near you, had you even led me into the ways of crime ? You've loved me too well : there is my glory and there my grief. My illness has lasted long, Balthazar ; it began on the day when in this spot where I'm about to die you proved to me you belonged more to science than to family. Here is your wife dead and your own fortune consumed. Your fortune and your wife were your belongings, you could dispose of them ; but the day I shall

170 The Tragedy of a Genius

be no more my fortune will be your children's and you will not be able to take any of it.

"What will then become of you? I now owe you the truth; the dying see far! Where henceforth will be the counterpoise to balance the accursed passion of which you have made your life? If you sacrificed me to it your children will be mere trifles to you, for I owe you the justice to avow that you prefer me to everybody. Two millions, and six years' work, have been hurled into that gulf and you've found nothing——"

At these words Claes laid his whitened head in his hands and hid his face.

"You will find nothing but shame for yourself, poverty for your children," went on the dying woman. "You're already nicknamed in derision 'Claes the alchemist': later, it will be 'Claes the madman'! I, I believe in you. I know you're great, learned, full of genius; but to the vulgar genius is like madness. Glory is the sun of the dead; in your lifetime you'll be unhappy, like every man that was great, and you'll ruin your children. I'm departing without having enjoyed your renown, which would have consoled me for having lost happiness. Well, my dear Balthazar, in order to make death less bitter to me I must be certain our children shall have a piece of bread, but nothing, not even you, could calm my anxieties——"

"I swear," said Claes, "to——"

The Tragedy of a Genius 171

"Don't swear, my friend, so as not to break your oath," she interjected. "You owed us your protection, it has failed us for nearly seven years. Science is your life. A great man can have neither wife nor children. Go alone along your paths of poverty! Your virtues are not those of the vulgar herd, you belong to the world, you could not belong either to a wife or to a family. You dry up the soil around you, like big trees! I, poor plant, have not been able to rise high enough, I'm half dying of your life. I waited for this last day to tell you these horrible thoughts, which I've only discovered by the lightning flashes of grief and despair. Spare your children! Let this phrase re-echo in your heart! I shall repeat it to you till my last sigh. The wife is dead, you see! You slowly and gradually despoiled her of her feelings, her pleasures. Alas! without the cruel care you have involuntarily taken, should I have lived so long? But the poor children did not desert me, not they! They have grown up near my griefs, the mother has survived. Spare, spare our children!"

"Lemulquinier!" shouted Blathazar in a thundering voice.

The old valet at once appeared.

"Go and destroy everything upstairs, machines, apparatus; do it with precaution, but break everything to pieces. I give up science!" he said to his wife.

"It's too late!" she added, gazing at Lemul-

172 The Tragedy of a Genius

quinier. "Marguerite!" she cried, feeling herself dying.

Marguerite appeared on the threshold and uttered a shriek on seeing her mother's glazing eyes.

"Marguerite!" repeated the dying woman.

The last exclamation contained so violent an appeal to her daughter, she invested it with such authority, that this cry was a whole will and testament. The family hastened in in a fright and saw Mme Claes expire, who had exhausted her life's last strength in the conversation with her husband.

Balthazar and Marguerite, motionless, she at the bedside, he at the foot of it, could not believe in the death of the woman whose entire virtues and inexhaustible tenderness were only known by them. Father and daughter exchange a look fraught with thoughts; the daughter was judging her father, the father was already trembling at finding in his daughter the instrument of a vengeance. Although the memories of love by which his wife had filled his life came back in crowds to besiege his memory and lent the dead woman's last words a holy authority which was bound to make him always hear her voice, Balthazar doubted his heart, which was too weak for his genius; then he heard a terrible growling of passion, which denied him the strength of his repentance and made him afraid of himself.

When this woman had vanished everyone

The Tragedy of a Genius 173

understood that Claes House had a soul and that that soul was no more. The grief likewise in the family was so living that the parlour where the noble Joséphine seemed to live again remained closed ; nobody had the ccourage to go into it.

XIII

SOCIETY does not practise any of the virtues it demands from men ; it commits crimes every hour, but commits them in words ; it makes ready for bad action by joking, even as it degrades the beautiful by ridicule ; it jeers at sons who weep overmuch for their fathers, it anathematises those who do not weep enough for them ; then it, it ! amuses itself by underrating the corpses before they are cold——

The evening of the day when Mme Claes died her friends threw some flowers on her grave between playing at two whist parties, paid homage to her fine qualities by looking for hearts or spades. Then after some lachrymose phrases which are the *ba-bé-bi-bo-bu* of collective grief and are pronounced in the same tones without more nor less sentiment in all the towns of France and at all hours, everybody ciphered up the product of the estate bequeathed. Pierquin first of the lot brought to the observation of those who were gossiping about the event that that excellent woman's death was a relief to her ; her husband was making her too unhappy ; but it was a still greater good for her children ; she would not have been able to refuse her fortune to her hus-

The Tragedy of a Genius 175

band whom she worshipped, whilst to-day Claes could not dispose of it any more. And everybody estimated poor Mme Claes's legacy, reckoned up her savings (had she any? had she none?), inventoried her jewels, exposed her wardrobe, delved into her drawers, whilst the afflicted family wept and prayed around the bed of death. With the lightning glance of an expert weigher of fortunes Pierquin calculated that Mme Claes's property ought to amount to a sum of about fifteen hundred thousand francs represented either by the forest of Waignies, whose wood had gained an enormous value during the last twelve years; or by Balthazar's property, which was still good for the compensation of his children if the value of the liquidation did not acquit him in their respect. Mlle Claes was therefore, to use his jargon, a girl of four hundred thousand francs.

"But if she does not marry promptly," he added—"and marriage would emancipate her and would allow of the forest of Waignies being sold by auction, of liquidating the share of the minors and of using it so that the father would not touch it—M. Claes is a man who would ruin his children."

Everyone inquired who in the province were the young men capable of pretending to Mlle Claes's hand, but nobody paid the notary the compliment of supposing him worthy of it. The notary found reasons for rejecting each of the parties proposed as unworthy of Marguerite. The

176 The Tragedy of a Genius

gossips glanced smilingly at each other and took pleasure in prolonging this piece of provincial malice. Pierquin had seen an event favourable to his claims in Mme Claes's death, and he was already dissecting that corpse for his profit.

"That worthy woman," he said to himself as he returned home to sleep, "was proud as a peacock and would never have given me her daughter. Eh! Eh! Why should I not scheme now so as to marry her? Old Claes is a man drunk with carbon, who cares no more for his children; if I ask him for his daughter, after convincing Marguerite of the urgency of her marrying in order to save her brothers' and sister's fortune, he will be glad to get rid of a child who may worry him."

He went to sleep seeing the matrimonial beauties of the contract, pondering on all the advantages offered him by this affair, and the guarantees he found for his happiness in the person whose spouse he was making himself.

It was difficult to meet in the province a young person more delicately beautiful and better brought up than Marguerite. Her modesties, her grace, were comparable to those of the pretty flower Emmanuel had not dared name before her, fearing thus to disclose the secret wishes of his heart. Her sentiments were proud, her principles religious. She was sure to be a chaste wife, but she not only flattered the vanity every man more or less exerts in the choice of a wife, but she also

The Tragedy of a Genius 177

satisfied the notary's pride by the immense consideration her family, doubly noble, enjoyed in Flanders, and which her husband would share.

Next day Pierquin drew out of his bank a few notes of a thousand francs and went and offered them to Balthazar in a friendly way, in order to spare him money worries at a moment when he was plunged in grief. Touched by the delicate attention Balthazar would doubtless praise the notary's heart and person to his daughter. Nothing of the sort. M. Claes and his daughter found the act quite simple, and their suffering was too exclusive for them to think of Pierquin. In truth, Balthazar's despair was so great that persons disposed to blame his conduct forgave it him, less in the name of the science that might excuse him than in favour of his regrets which did not repair the evil. The world contents itself with grimaces, it pays itself out of what it gives, without verifying its quality. For society true grief is a spectacle, a sort of enjoyment which inclines it to absolve everybody, even a criminal ; in its greed of emotions it acquits without discernment both him who makes it laugh and him who makes it cry, without asking them for an account of the means.

Marguerite had reached her nineteenth year when her father handed over to her the control of the house, where her authority was piously recognised by her sister and her two brothers, whom during the last moments of her life Mme Claes had

178 The Tragedy of a Genius

advised to obey the elder sister. The mourning threw into relief her white freshness, even as sadness showed up her gentleness and patience. From the first days she lavished proofs of that feminine courage, of that continual serenity which the angels charged with spreading peace must possess, when they touch suffering hearts with their green plume. But if she was accustomed by the premature understanding of her duties to hide her grief, it was none the less keen; her outward calm did not accord with the depth of her sensations; and she was fated to know early the terrible reflexions of feeling which the heart does not always suffice to constrain; her father was destined to keep her hard pressed between the generosities natural to young souls and the voice of an imperious necessity. The calculations which engaged her on the very day after her mother's death brought her to grips with the interests of life, at a time when young women only imagine the pleasures of it. Fearful education of suffering which has never been wanting to angelic natures!

Love which is based on money and vanity is the most obstinate of passions. Pierquin did not intend to delay circumventing the heiress. Some days after the putting-on of mourning, he sought occasion to speak with Marguerite, and began operations with a skill that might have attracted her; but love had set in her soul a clear-sightedness which prevented her from letting herself be taken in by exterior appearances the more favour-

able to sentimental deceits, because in these circumstances Pierquin displayed the kindness which belonged to him, the kindness of a notary who fancies himself loving when he rescues a few crowns. Strong in his dubious relationship, in the constant habit he had been in of carrying on this family's business and sharing its secrets, sure of the father's esteem and friendship, well served by the indifference of a scientist who had no fixed plan for establishing his daughter, and not supposing Marguerite could have a predilection, he allowed her to set his courtship down as one that only played at passion when allied with calculations most odious to young souls and which he could not conceal. It was he who showed himself simple, it was she who used dissembling, precisely because he thought he was dealing with a defenceless girl and misrated the privileges of weakness.

"My dear cousin," he said to Marguerite, with whom he was walking in the alleys of the little garden, "you know my heart and you know how inclined I am to respect the sentiments of grief which affect you just now. My soul is too sensitive for a notary. I only live by the heart, and I am obliged to occupy myself continually with others' interests, when I should like to abandon myself to the gentle emotions that make life happy. So I suffer much at being compelled to talk to you of projects discordant with the state of your soul, but it is necessary. I have not ceased

180 The Tragedy of a Genius

thinking of you for some days. I have just recognised that by a singular fatality the fortune of your brothers and your sister, even your own, are in danger.—D'you want to save your family from complete ruin ? ”

“ What's got to be done ? ” she said, half frightened by these words.

“ Marry,” answered Pierquin.

“ I shan't marry,” she cried.

“ You will marry,” the notary went on, “ when you have ripely reflected on your critical position.”

“ How can my marriage save—— ? ”

“ That's what I was expecting, cousin,” he said, breaking in. “ Marriage emancipates ! ”

“ Why should I be emancipated ? ” asked Marguerite.

“ To put you in possession, my dear little cousin,” answered the notary with an air of triumph. “ In that occurrence you take your share in your mother's fortune. In order to give it you, it must be liquidated ; now in order to liquidate it will it not be needful to sell the forest of Waignies ? That settled, all the values of the legacy will be capitalised, and your father as guardian will be bound to set aside your brothers' and your sister's portion, in such manner that chemistry will not be able to touch it any more.”

“ What would happen in the contrary case ? ” she inquired.

“ Why,” said the notary, “ your father will

The Tragedy of a Genius 181

administer your property. If he began again wanting to make gold he could sell the wood of Waignies and leave you naked as little St. Johns. The forest of Waignies is just now worth near fourteen hundred thousand francs ; but if from to-day to to-morrow your father cuts it down recklessly, your thirteen hundred acres will not be worth three hundred thousand francs. Is it not better to avoid that almost certain danger by making the chance of partition lapse from to-day through your emancipation ? In that way you'll save all the fellings of the forest of which your father would dispose later to your prejudice. Just now, whilst chemistry slumbers, he will necessarily put the values of the liquidation on the ledger.

“ The funds are at fifty-nine, so that these dear children will have nearly five thousand livres income on fifty thousand francs ; and provided the capitals belonging to the minors cannot be disposed of, your brothers and your sister will see their fortune doubled at their majority. Whilst otherwise, my goodness !—There you are !—Moreover, your father has diminished your mother's property, we shall know the deficit by an inventory. If he owes a balance, you will take a mortgage on his property and you will save at least something.”

“ Fie ! ” cried Marguerite, “ that would be outraging my father. My mother's last words were not uttered so short a time ago that I can't recall them. My father is incapable of robbing his

182 The Tragedy of a Genius

children," she added, shedding tears of grief. "You misunderstand him, M. Pierquin."

"But if, my dear cousin, your father turns again to chemistry——"

"We'll be ruined, eh?"

"Oh! but utterly ruined! Believe me, Marguerite," he said, taking her hand, which he laid on his heart; "I should be neglecting my duties if I didn't insist. Your interests alone——"

"Sir," replied Marguerite coldly, withdrawing her hand, "my family's interests, it is well understood, demand that I shouldn't marry. My mother thought so too."

"Cousin," he cried, with the conviction of a moneyed man who sees a fortune lost, "you're committing suicide, you're throwing your mother's legacy into the gutter.—Well, I'll show the devotion of the excessive friendship I bear you! You don't know how much I love you, adore you, since the day I saw you at the last ball your father gave! You were bewitching. You may trust yourself to the voice of the heart when it talks of interests, my dear Marguerite——"

He paused.

"Yes, we shall call a family council and emancipate you without consulting you."

"But what's the meaning of 'emancipated'?"

"Enjoying one's rights."

"If I can be emancipated without marrying, why d'you want me to marry?—and whom?"

Pierquin tried to gaze tenderly at his cousin,

The Tragedy of a Genius 183

but the expression contrasted so distinctly with the rigidity of his eyes, accustomed to speak of money, that Marguerite believed she perceived calculation in the improvised affection.

"You'll have married the person who has pleased you—in the town," he went on. "A husband is indispensable to you even as a matter of business. You will have to deal with your father. Alone, could you resist him?"

"Yes, sir, I shall be able to defend my brothers and my sister when it's time."

"The deuce take it!" said Pierquin to himself.—"No, you will not be able to resist him," he resumed aloud.

"Let's change the subject," she said.

"Good-bye, cousin. I shall try and serve you despite yourself, and shall prove how much I love you by protecting you despite yourself against a misfortune which everyone in the town foresees."

"I thank you for the interest you display in me; but I beg you not to propose anything or to start anything that may cause my father the least distress."

Marguerite remained thoughtful as she watched Pierquin depart; she compared his metallic voice, his manners which had only the suppleness of springs, his looks which showed more servility than gentleness, with the tunefully mute poetry in which Emmanuel's feelings were clad. Whatever one may say or do, there is a wonderful

184 The Tragedy of a Genius

magnetism whose effects are never deceptive. The sound of the voice, the look, the passionate gestures of a man in love may be imitated, a young woman may be taken in by a clever actor ; but must he not be alone in order to succeed ? If this young girl has near her a soul which vibrates in unison with her feelings, has she not quickly recognised the utterances of true love ?

Emmanuel was at the moment, like Marguerite, under the influence of the clouds which since their meeting had inevitably formed a gloomy atmosphere over their heads and robbed them of the sight of love's blue sky. He had an idolatry for his chosen one which the want of hope makes so sweet and so mysterious in its pious manifestations. Socially too far removed from Mlle Claes by his small amount of fortune and having only a fine name to offer her he saw no chance of being accepted as her spouse. He had always looked for some encouragement, which Marguerite had denied herself to give him under her dying mother's failing eyes. Equally pure, they had therefore not exchanged a single word of love. Their joys had been the selfish joys which the unfortunate are obliged to taste alone. They had shivered with rapture separately although they were agitated by a shared ray of the same hope ; they seemed to be afraid of themselves, feeling they were already too close to each other. So Emmanuel trembled at touching the hand of the sovereign for whom he had made a sanctuary in his heart. The most

The Tragedy of a Genius 185

careless contact would have developed a too provoking voluptuousness in him, he would no longer have been master of his unbridled senses.

But although they had not accorded themselves any of the fragile and immense, the innocent and serious evidences of love which the most timid lovers allow themselves, they had yet housed each other so well in each other's heart that both knew they were ready to make the greatest sacrifices, the sole pleasures they could enjoy. Since Mme Claes's death their secret love was stifled under the mourning crape. From being brown the tints of the sphere in which they lived had become black, and any brightness was extinguished in tears. Marguerite's reserve almost changed to coldness, for she had to keep the oath required by her mother, and becoming freer than before she made herself stiffer. Emmanuel had espoused the mourning of his well-beloved, understanding that the slightest confession of love, the simplest demand would be a forfeiture in respect of the heart's laws. This great love was accordingly more concealed than ever. The two tender souls always gave forth the same sound; but separated by grief as they had been by youth's timidities and by the respect due to the dead one's sufferings they still clung to the magnificent language of the eyes, to the mute eloquence of devoted acts, to a continual coherence, sublime harmonies of youth, first steps of love in its childhood.

186 The Tragedy of a Genius

Emmanuel came every morning for news of Claes and Marguerite ; but he only went into the dining-room when he brought a letter from Gabriel or when Balthazar asked him to come in. His first glance at the young woman told her a thousand sympathetic thoughts ; he suffered through the discretion imposed on him by the conventions, he had not deserted her, he shared her sadness, lastly he shed the dew of his tears on his friend's heart by a look which no after-thought altered. The good young man lived so much in the present, he was so attracted to a happiness he thought fugitive that Marguerite sometimes reproached herself for not generously holding out her hand and saying to him, " Let's be friends ! "

Pierquin continued his obsessions with the obstinacy which is the unreflecting patience of fools. He judged Marguerite according to the ordinary rules used by the multitude to appreciate women. He thought the words marriage, freedom, fortune, which he had whispered in her ear, would blossom in her soul, would there develop a desire by which he would profit, and he fancied her coldness was dissembling. But although he surrounded her with cares and gallant attentions he ill concealed the despotic manners of a man accustomed to settle the highest questions of family life. He uttered for her solace the platitudes familiar to people of his profession, which pass like snails over griefs and leave a trail of dry words which

The Tragedy of a Genius 187

deflower their sanctity. His affliction was mere wheedling. He abandoned his feigned melancholy at the door when putting on his goloshes or taking his umbrella. He used the tone which his long familiarity authorised him to assume as an instrument to advance further into the heart of the family, to decide Marguerite upon a marriage proclaimed in advance throughout the town.

True, devoted, respectful love therefore showed a striking contrast with a selfish, calculating one. Everything was homogeneous in the two men. The one feigned a passion and armed himself with his least advantages so as to be able to marry Marguerite ; the other hid his love and trembled to let his devotion be noticed.

Some time after her mother's death and on the same day Marguerite was able to compare the only two men whom she was in a position to judge. Till then the solitude to which she had been condemned had not allowed her to see society, and her situation left no access to persons who might think of proposing to her. One day, after breakfast on one of the first fine mornings in April, Emmanuel came just when M. Claes was going out. Balthazar could so hardly endure the sight of his house that he used to go for a walk along the ramparts for a part of the day. Emmanuel was inclined to follow Balthazar, he hesitated, seemed to summon up force in himself, looked at Marguerite and remained. Marguerite guessed the professor wanted to speak to her and pro-

188 The Tragedy of a Genius

posed going into the garden. She sent off her sister Félicie to Martha, who was working in the ante-room on the first floor ; then she went and sat on a bench where she could be seen by her sister and the old duenna.

" M. Claes is as absorbed by grief as he was in his scientific researches," said the young man, seeing Balthazar walking slowly in the court. " Everyone in the town pities him ; he goes about like a man who is no longer master of his ideas ; he steps without motive, looks without seeing——"

" Every grief has its expression," said Marguerite, restraining her tears. " What did you want to tell me ? " she went on after a pause, with cold dignity.

" Mademoiselle," answered Emmanuel in a moved voice, " have I the right to speak to you as I am about to now ? I pray you only see my wish to be useful to you, and let me believe that a teacher may interest himself in his pupils' fate to the extent of being anxious about their future. Your brother Gabriel is over fifteen, he is in the second form, and it is certainly necessary to direct his studies in the spirit of the career he will embrace. Your father is the one to settle the question ; but if he didn't think of it, wouldn't it be a misfortune for Gabriel ? Would it not also be very mortifying for your father if you made him observe that he is troubling about his son ? In this conjuncture could you not consult your

The Tragedy of a Genius 189

brother about his tastes, make him choose a career of his own accord, so that if later your father wanted to make of him a magistrate, an administrator, a soldier, Gabriel would already have special knowledge? I don't believe either you or M. Claes would like to leave him idle——"

"Oh! no," said Marguerite. "I thank you, M. Emmanuel, you're right. My mother, by turning us to make lace, by teaching us with such care to draw, sew, embroider, play the piano, often told us one never knew what might happen in life. Gabriel must have a personal value and a complete education. But what's the most suitable career for a man?"

"Mademoiselle," said Emmanuel, quivering with delight, "Gabriel is the one in his class who shows most aptitude for mathematics; if he wanted to enter the Polytechnic School I think he would get knowledge there useful in every career. On leaving he would remain free to choose that for which he had most taste. Without having up to that point prejudged anything about his future, you will have gained time. Men leaving that school with honours are welcome everywhere. It has furnished administrators, diplomats, savants, engineers, generals, sailors, magistrates, manufacturers and bankers. So there's nothing extraordinary in seeing a young man, rich or of good family, working with the object of admission there. If Gabriel decided on it, I would ask you—will you grant it me? Say yes!"

190 The Tragedy of a Genius

"What do you want?"

"To be his tutor," he answered, trembling.

Marguerite looked at M. de Solis, took his hand, and said:

"Yes."

She paused and added in a moved voice:

"How I appreciate the delicacy which induces you to offer precisely what I can accept from you! In what you've just said I can see you have thought much about us. I thank you."

Although the words were said simply, Emmanuel turned aside his head to hide the tears which the joy of being pleasing to Marguerite brought to his eyes.

"I'll bring them both to you," he said on recovering a little calmness; "to-morrow is breaking-up day."

He rose, saluted Marguerite, who followed him, and, when he was in the court, he saw her still at the dining-room door, where she waved him a friendly sign.

XIV

AFTER dinner the notary came on a visit to M. Claes and sat down in the garden between his cousin and Marguerite precisely on the bench on which Emmanuel had sat.

"My dear cousin," he said, "I came to-night to talk business to you. Forty-three days have gone since your wife's decease——"

"I haven't reckoned them," said Balthazar, wiping away a tear torn from him by the legal word "decease."

"Oh! sir," said Marguerite, staring at the notary, "how can you——?"

"But we, my cousin, we are obliged to count the delays fixed by law. It is precisely a question of yourself and your co-heirs. M. Claes has only children who are minors; he is obliged to make an inventory in the forty-five days following his wife's decease, so as to establish the value of the common property. Must you not know if it is good or bad, in order to accept it or to hold out for the pure and simple rights of minors?"

Marguerite got up.

"Stop, cousin," said Pierquin, "this business concerns you, you and your father. You know how much I share your griefs; but you must

192 The Tragedy of a Genius

trouble yourself even to-day with these details ; or you might all of you be much the worse for it ! I am just now doing my duty as the family notary."

" He's right," said Claes.

" The delay expires in two days," the notary went on. " I ought therefore to proceed from to-morrow to the opening of the inventory, were it only to delay the payment of the succession duties which the public treasury people will come and ask you for ; they have no heart, they don't bother about feelings, they may lay hands on us at any time. Therefore every day from ten to four my clerk and I will come with M. Raparlier, the appraiser. As soon as we've finished in town we'll go to the country. As for the forest of Waignies we're going to talk about it. That settled, let's pass on to another point. We have to summon a family council in order to name a surrogate guardian. M. Conyncks, of Bruges, is to-day your nearest relation ; but he's become a Belgian ! You ought, my cousin, to write him on the subject ; you would know if the worthy man wants to settle in France, where he possesses handsome estates, and you might thus decide him to live with his daughter in French Flanders. If he refuses I shall see about composing the council according to the degrees of relationship."

" What's the use of an inventory ? " asked Marguerite.

" To establish the duties, the values, the assets

The Tragedy of a Genius 193

and the debts. When everything's properly settled the family council takes in the interest of the minors the decisions it judges——"

"Pierquin," said Claes, who got up from the bench, "proceed to the acts you will believe needful for preserving my children's rights; but spare us the distress of seeing sold what belonged to my dear——"

He did not finish, he had said the words with so noble an air and in so poignant a tone that Marguerite took her father's hand and kissed it.

"Till to-morrow," said Pierquin.

"Come for lunch," said Balthazar.

Then Claes seemed to pull his memory together and exclaimed :

"But according to my marriage contract, which was made according to the Hainaut custom, I had dispensed my wife from the inventory, so that she should not be tormented. I am probably not bound to it either——"

"Ah ! what a delight !" said Marguerite ;
"it would have cost us so much worry——"

"Well, we'll examine your contract to-morrow," replied the notary, a bit confused.

"So you didn't know of it ? " said Marguerite.

This remark broke off the conversation. The notary was too embarrassed to continue, after his cousin's observation.

"The devil take it !" he said to himself in the court. "This absent-minded fellow rediscovers his memory just when he ought in order to

194 The Tragedy of a Genius

prevent precautions being taken against him. His children will be despoiled! It's as sure as two and two make four. Fancy speaking business to girls of nineteen who indulge in gush! I've bothered myself to death to save those children's property by proceeding regularly and getting into understanding with the worthy Conyncks—and there you are! I've ruined myself in Marguerite's opinion, who is about to ask her father why I wanted to proceed to an inventory which she believes useless. And M. Claes will tell her that notaries have a mania for drawing up deeds, that we are notaries before being relations, cousins or friends; in fact, all sorts of nonsense——"

He banged the door hard, cursing clients who ruined themselves by sensitiveness.

Balthazar was right. The inventory did not take place. So nothing was settled as to the position of the father in regard to his children. Several months went by without change in the situation in the Claes family. Gabriel, skilfully guided by M. de Solis, who had made himself his tutor, worked industriously, learnt foreign tongues, and got ready to pass the examination necessary for entering the Polytechnic School. Félicie and Marguerite had lived in absolute retirement, going, however, out of economy, to spend the fine season at their father's country house. M. Claes was busied about his affairs, paid his debts by borrowing a considerable sum on his properties, and visited the forest of Waignies.

The Tragedy of a Genius 195

About the middle of 1817 his grief, slowly mitigated, left him alone and defenceless against the monotony of the life he was leading, which depressed him. At first he fought courageously against science which insensibly reawoke in him and forbade himself to think of chemistry. Then he thought about it. But he did not intend to occupy himself with it actively, he only did so theoretically. This continual study made his passion rise till it overpowered him. He disputed whether he was bound not to continue his researches, and remembered that his wife had not required his oath. Although he had promised himself no longer to pursue the solution of his problem, couldn't he change his mind at the moment he caught sight of a success? He was already fifty-nine. At that age the idea dominating him contracted the harsh fixity with which monomanias begin. Circumstances also conspired against his tottering loyalty. The peace enjoyed by Europe had permitted the circulation of the discoveries and scientific ideas acquired during the wars by the savants of the various countries between which there had been no relations for nearly twenty years. So science had advanced. Claes found that the progress of chemistry had tended, unknown to the chemists, towards the aim of his researches. People given to high science thought, like him, that light, heat, electricity, galvanism and magnetism were different effects of a like cause, that the difference between bodies

196 The Tragedy of a Genius

till then thought simple must be produced by the diverse proportionings of an unknown principle.

The fear of seeing discovered by another the reduction of the metals and the constituent principle of electricity, two discoveries which led to the solution of the chemical absolute, augmented what the inhabitants of Douai termed a madness, and drove his desires to a paroxysm which will be conceived by persons passionately fond of the sciences or who have known the tyranny of ideas. So Balthazar was soon carried away by a passion the more violent because it had slumbered so long. Marguerite, who watched the soul-phases through which her father was going, opened the parlour. By living there she revived the painful memories caused by her mother's death, and indeed succeeded, by resuscitating her father's regrets, in delaying his fall into the gulf where he was yet bound to fall. She wanted to go into society, and forced Balthazar to seek distraction there. Several important proposals were made to her, and they occupied Claes, although Marguerite declared she would not marry before twenty-five. Despite his daughter's efforts, despite violent struggles, Balthazar at the beginning of winter secretly resumed his works. It was hard to hide such occupations from inquisitive women. So one day Martha said to Marguerite whilst dressing her :

"Miss, we're lost ! That monster Mulquinier, who's the devil disguised, for I never saw him make

The Tragedy of a Genius 197

the sign of the cross, has gone back to the attic. There's your father on his way to hell.—May Heaven stay him killing you as he killed the poor dear mistress ! ”

“ That's not possible,” said Marguerite.

“ Come and see the proof of their goings-on——”

Mlle Claes ran to the window, and truly noticed a slight smoke issuing from the laboratory chimney.

“ I'm twenty-one in a few months,” she thought. “ I'll be able to stop the squandering of our fortune.”

Abandoning himself to his passion Balthazar had necessarily less concern for his children's interests than he had had for his wife's. The barriers were less high, his conscience was broader, his passion became stronger. So he went on in his career of glory, work, hope and poverty with the fury of a man full of conviction. Sure of the result, he began working day and night with a transport that frightened his daughters, who knew not how little injurious is work in which a man takes pleasure. As soon as her father had begun his experiments again Marguerite had retrenched the superfluities of the table, became parsimonious to a miserly degree, and was admirably seconded by Josette and Martha.

Claes did not notice the reform which reduced life to strict necessities. At first he did not lunch, then he only came down from his laboratory at the very moment of dinner, finally he went to bed a few hours after remaining in the parlour

198 The Tragedy of a Genius

between his daughters without uttering a word. When he withdrew they wished him good night, and he let himself be kissed mechanically on the cheeks. Such conduct would have caused the greatest domestic unhappiness had not Marguerite been prepared to use a mother's authority and been fortified in advance by a secret passion against the misfortunes of so great liberty.

Pierquin had stopped visiting his cousins, judging their ruin to be about to be complete. Balthazar's country estates which brought in sixteen thousand francs and were worth about two hundred thousand crowns were already burdened with three hundred thousand francs in mortgages. Before returning to chemistry Claes had made a considerable loan. The revenue exactly sufficed for the payment of the interest; but as with the improvidence natural to men devoted to an idea he abandoned his farm-property to Marguerite to defray house expenses, the notary had calculated that three years would be enough to ruin the whole thing and that the lawyers would devour what Balthazar had not eaten. Marguerite's coldness had brought Pierquin to a state of almost hostile indifference. In order to give himself the right to renounce his cousin's hand if she became too poor, he would say of the Claeses with an air of pity:

"Those poor people are ruined! I did all I could to save them; but, what could be done? Mlle Claes would have nothing to do with any of

The Tragedy of a Genius 199

the legal combinations that might keep them from poverty——”

Named principal of the college of Douai by his uncle's patronage, Emmanuel, whom his transcendent merit had made worthy of the post, came every day to visit the two young women in the evening, who summoned to them the duenna as soon as their father went to bed. Young de Solis's door-knock was never late. For three months, encouraged by the dumb, gracious gratitude with which Marguerite accepted his cares, he had become himself. The beams of his soul, pure as a diamond, shone without clouds, and Marguerite could appreciate the strength, the duration of them, seeing how the source of them was inexhaustible. She wondered at the flowers budding one by one after having breathed their perfumes beforehand. Emmanuel realised every day one of Marguerite's hopes and caused the enchanted regions of love to be lit up by new lights which dispelled the clouds, gave again serenity to their sky, and tinted the abundant riches buried till then in the shade. More at his ease, Emmanuel could display the seductions of his heart, till then discreetly hidden; the expansive gaiety of youthful age, the simplicity lent by a life filled with study, and the treasures of a delicate mind unadulterated by the world, all the innocent joyousnesses fitting so well to loving youth. His soul and Marguerite's understood each other better: they went together to the

200 The Tragedy of a Genius

bottom of their souls and found there the same thoughts ; pearls of an identical brilliance, suave and fresh harmonies similar to those beneath the sea, which they say bewitch the divers ! They got to know each other by those exchanges of talk, by that alternate curiosity, which took in both the most delicious forms of feeling. It was without false shame, but not without mutual coqueties.

The two hours spent every evening by Emmanuel between the young women and Martha enabled Marguerite to accept the life of anguish and resignation into which she had entered. This naively progressive love was her support. Emmanuel carried into his evidences of affection the natural grace which is so charming, the sweet and refined mind that varies the uniformity of the feeling, just as facets relieve the monotony of a jewel by causing all its fires to play ; marvellous ways whose secret belongs to loving hearts and which makes women faithful to the artist-hand by which the forms arise again ever new, to the voice which never repeats a phrase without refreshing it by new modulations. Love is not only a sentiment, it is also an art. Some simple word, a precaution, a nothing, reveal to a woman the great and sublime artist who may touch her heart without soiling it. The more Emmanuel went the more charming were his love's expressions.

" I've anticipated Pierquin," he told her one

The Tragedy of a Genius 201

night ; " he's coming to give you bad news ; I prefer to tell you myself. Your father has sold your forest to speculators, who have sold it again in portions ; the trees are already cut, all the timber is removed. M. Claes has received three hundred thousand francs in cash, which he has used to pay his Paris debts ; and in order to get rid of them entirely he has been even obliged to make an assignment of a hundred thousand francs on the hundred thousand crowns that remain to be paid by the buyers."

Pierquin entered.

" Well, my dear cousin, there you are ! ruined ! I told you so ; but you didn't want to hear me. Your father has a good appetite. He has swallowed your woods as a first mouthful. Your surrogate guardian, M. Conyncks, is at Amsterdam, where he has just finished liquidating his fortune and Claes has seized the moment for his stroke. It's not right. I've just written to the worthy Conyncks ; but when he arrives the whole thing will be squandered. You'll have to prosecute your father ; the action will not be long, but it will be a dishonouring action which M. Conyncks can't prevent himself from bringing, because the law requires it. That's the fruit of your obstinacy ! Do you now recognise how prudent I was, how devoted to your interests ? "

" I bring you good news, Mademoiselle," said young de Solis in his soft voice ; " Gabriel has been admitted to the Polytechnic School. The

202 The Tragedy of a Genius

difficulties about his admission have been got over."

Marguerite thanked her friend with a smile and said :

" My economies will have an aim ! Martha, we'll busy ourselves to-morrow about Gabriel's outfit. My poor Félicie, we're indeed going to work," she said, kissing her sister on the forehead.

" To-morrow you'll have him here for ten days, he must be in Paris on 15 November."

" My cousin Gabriel is doing the right thing," said the notary, measuring the college-master ; " he'll have need to make himself a fortune. But, my dear cousin, it's a matter of saving the family honour : will you listen to me this time ? "

" No, if it's still a question of marriage."

" But, what are you going to do ? "

" I, cousin ?—Nothing."

" Still, you're of age."

" In a few days. Have you," said Marguerite, " a proposal to make to me which may conciliate our interests with what we owe our father, the family honour ? "

" Cousin, we can do nothing without your uncle. That settled, I'll come back when he is returning."

" Good-bye, sir," said Marguerite.

" The poorer she gets, the haughtier she acts," thought the notary.

" Good-bye, Mademoiselle," rejoined Pierquin

The Tragedy of a Genius 203

aloud. "M. le Proviseur, I salute you most courteously."

And he went out without heeding Félicie or Martha.

"For two days I've been studying the Code, and I've consulted an old advocate, a friend of my uncle," said Emmanuel in a trembling voice. "If you authorise me I'll go to-morrow to Amsterdam. Listen, dear Marguerite——"

He said the word for the first time ; she thanked him for it by a tearful look, by a smile and a nod. He stopped, pointed to Félicie and Martha.

"Speak in my sister's presence," said Marguerite. "She does not need this discussion to resign herself to our life of privation and work, she's so gentle and so courageous ! but she ought to know how much we need courage."

The sisters took each other's hands and kissed as if to give themselves a new pledge of their union in the presence of misfortune.

"Leave us, Martha."

"Dear Marguerite," went on Emmanuel, revealing in the inflection of his voice the happiness he felt at winning the minor rights of affection, "I've procured the names and addresses of the buyers who owe the two hundred thousand francs remaining from the price of the timber. To-morrow, if you agree, a barrister acting in M. Conynck's name, who will not disavow him, will place an attachment in their hands. In six days your grand-uncle will return ; he'll call a family

204 The Tragedy of a Genius

council, and have Gabriel declared of age ; he is eighteen. You and your brother, being authorised to use your rights, you will ask for your share in the price of the wood.

" M. Claes will not be able to refuse you the two hundred thousand francs secured by the attachment ; as for the one hundred thousand other francs which will still be due to you you will get a bond on mortgage, which will rest on the house you live in. M. Conyncks will demand guarantees for the three hundred thousand francs which return to Mlle Félicie and Jean. In this situation your father will be forced to let his estates on the plain of Orchies be mortgaged, which are already encumbered with one hundred thousand crowns. The law gives a retroactive priority to registries made in minors' interests ; all will thus be saved. M. Claes will henceforth have his hands tied, your estates are inalienable ; he'll not be able to borrow on his own, which will be guaranteeing sums of money above their price, the business will be done in the family, without scandal, without proceedings. Your father will be forced to go prudently in his researches, if even he does not cease them altogether."

" Yes," said Marguerite, " but where will our incomes be ? The one hundred thousand francs mortgaged on this house will bring us in nothing, since we're living here. The produce of the estates my father possesses in the plain

The Tragedy of a Genius 205

of Orchies will pay the interest on the three hundred thousand francs owing to strangers ; on what shall we live ? ”

“ First of all,” said Emmanuel, “ by putting the fifty thousand francs which will remain for Gabriel in the public funds on his behalf, you will derive, according to actual rates, more than four thousand livres income, which will suffice for his board and keep in Paris. Gabriel can’t dispose either of the money registered on his father’s house, nor of the capital of his income ; so you’ll not be afraid of his squandering a farthing of it, and you’ll have one burden less. Then will there not be left for you one hundred and fifty thousand francs ? ”

“ My father will ask me for them,” she said in a fright, “ and I shall not be able to refuse him.”

“ Well, dear Marguerite, you can still save them by depriving yourself of them. Place them on the ledger in your brother’s name. That sum will yield you twelve or thirteen thousand livres of income to live on. Emancipated minors not being able to alienate anything without a family council, you’ll thus gain three years’ peace. At that epoch your father will have solved his problem or will probably throw it up ; Gabriel become of age will restore to you the funds, in order to settle accounts between you four.”

Marguerite made him explain to her again the legal points she could not at first grasp.

206 The Tragedy of a Genius

Truly it was a new scene, that of two lovers studying the Code with which Emmanuel had provided himself so as to teach his mistress the laws governing minors' property ; she had soon seized the spirit of them, thanks to the penetration natural to women, and to whom love added sharpness.

Gabriel returned home next day. When M. de Solis took him to Balthazar announcing his admission to the Polytechnic School, the father thanked the principal by a gesture of the hand, and said :

" I'm very pleased ; so Gabriel will be a savant ! "

" Oh, my brother," said Marguerite, on seeing Balthazar go up to his laboratory, " work hard, don't waste money ! Do all that's needed ; but be thrifty. On the days you go out in Paris go to our friends, to our relations, so as not to contract any of the tastes which ruin young men. Your board comes to nearly one thousand crowns, you will have one thousand francs left for your enjoyments. That ought to be enough."

" I answer for him," said Emmanuel de Solis, clapping his pupil on the back.

XV

A MONTH later M. Conyncks, in concert with Marguerite, had obtained from Claes all the guarantees desirable. The schemes so ably conceived by Emmanuel de Solis were entirely approved and enforced. In the presence of the law and his cousin, whose savage honesty hardly compromised on questions of honour, Balthazar, ashamed of the sale to which he had agreed at a time when he was harassed by his creditors, submitted to all demands on him. Satisfied at being able to repair the injury he had almost involuntarily done his children, he signed the deeds with a savant's preoccupation. He had become completely improvident, like niggers who sell their wives for a drop of gin in the morning, and weep for them at night. He did not even cast a glance at his immediate future, he did not ask himself what resources he would have after melting his last crown ; he pursued his work, continued his purchases, without knowing he was now only the titular owner of his house, of his properties, and that it would be impossible for him, thanks to the severity of the law, to raise a halfpenny on the property of which he was in some sort the judiciary guardian.

208 The Tragedy of a Genius

The year 1818 expired without any unhappy event. The young women paid the costs of Jean's education, and defrayed all the expenses of the house out of the eighteen thousand francs income, invested in Gabriel's name, whose half-year's income was sent to them punctually by their brother. M. de Solis lost his uncle in December of that year.

One morning Marguerite learnt through Martha that her father had sold his collection of tulips, the furniture of the front house, and all the plate. She was obliged to redeem the covers necessary for table service, and had them marked with her cipher. Till that day she had kept silent about Balthazar's depredations, but at night, after dinner, she begged Félicie to leave her alone with her father, and when he was seated, according to habit, at the corner of the parlour chimney-piece, Marguerite said :

"My dear father, you are the master here, and can sell everything, even your children. Here we'll all obey you without murmur, but I'm forced to call your attention to the fact that we are without money, that we have hardly enough to live on this year, and that we, Félicie and I, shall be obliged to work night and day to pay Jean's board, with the price of the lace dress we have undertaken. I conjure you, my good father, discontinue your work."

"You're right, my child ; in six weeks all will be finished ! I shall have found the absolute

The Tragedy of a Genius 209

or the absolute will be indiscoverable. You will all be rich in millions——”

“Leave us for the moment a bit of bread,” replied Marguerite.

“Is there no bread here?” said Claes, with a frightened air; “no bread in Claes House? And all our property?”

“You’ve cut down Waignies forest. The soil is not yet free of it, and can produce nothing. As for your Orchies farms, the revenues are not enough to pay the interest of the sums you have borrowed.”

“On what then are we living?” he asked.

Marguerite showed him her needle, and added:

“Gabriel’s income helps us, but it’s insufficient. I’d make both ends meet if you didn’t overwhelm me with bills which I do not expect; you tell me nothing of your purchases in the town. When I fancy I have enough for my quarter and my small arrangements are made, there comes an account for soda, potassium, zinc, sulphur, heaven knows what.”

“My dear child, six more weeks of patience; afterwards I’ll behave wisely. And you’ll see wonders, my little Marguerite.”

“It’s high time you think about your affairs. You’ve sold everything—pictures, tulips, plate; you’ve nothing left; at least don’t incur fresh debts.”

“I don’t intend to any more,” said the old man.

210 The Tragedy of a Genius

"More!" she cried. "You have some, then?"
"Nothing, a mere trifle——" he answered, lowering his eyes and reddening.

Marguerite was for the first time humiliated by her father's humbling, and suffered so much from it that she did not dare question him.

A month after this scene a banker in the town came to realise on a bill of exchange for ten thousand francs signed by Claes. Marguerite having begged the banker to wait during the day, whilst expressing regret at not having been informed of this payment, the latter told her that the firm of Protez and Chiffreville had nine others of the same amount, falling due month by month.

"It's all up!" cried Marguerite, "the hour's come."

She sent for her father, and strode in her agitation up and down the parlour, saying to herself: "To find one hundred thousand francs, or see our father in gaol! What's to be done?"

Balthazar did not come down. Tired of waiting for him, Marguerite went up to the laboratory. On entering, she saw her father in the centre of a huge room, brilliantly lit, furnished with machines and dusty glassware; here and there books, tables laden with labelled, numbered products. Everywhere the disorder caused by the savant's preoccupation was a chill to Flemish habits. The collection of matrasses, retorts, metals, fantastically coloured crystallisations, specimens

The Tragedy of a Genius 211

hung upon the walls or cast on the furnaces, was dominated by the figure of Balthazar Claes, who, without a jacket, his arms bare as a workman's, displayed a chest covered with hair white as that on his head. His eyes staring horribly did not quit a pneumatic machine. The receiver of the machine was coiled with a lens formed by double convex glasses whose inside was full of alcohol, and which gathered together the sunbeams then entering by one of the compartments of the rose-window of the attic. The receiver, whose plateau was isolated, communicated with the wires of an immense voltaic pile.

Lemulquinier, busied in moving the plateau of this machine, which was mounted on a mobile axis, in order always to keep the lens in a direction perpendicular to the sunbeams, got up, his face black with dust, and said :

" Ah ! miss, don't come near ! "

The sight of her father who, almost kneeling before his machine, received the sunlight perpendicularly and whose scanty hair resembled silver threads, his dented skull, his face drawn in a fearful expectation, the singularity of the objects surrounding her, the darkness that shrouded the parts of that vast attic out of which bizarre machines thrust themselves, all helped to strike Marguerite with terror, saying to herself :

" My father is mad ! "

She drew near him to whisper in his ear :

" Dismiss Lemulquinier. "

212 The Tragedy of a Genius

"No, no, my child, I have need of him; I'm awaiting the result of a fine experiment of which the others did not think. It is three days now that we are watching a sunbeam. I have the means of submitting the metals in a perfect void to the concentrated solar fires and to electric currents. Look you, in a moment the most energetic action of which a chemist can dispose will burst forth, and I alone——"

"Eh! father, instead of vaporising metals you ought indeed to keep them to pay your bills of exchange——"

"Wait, wait!"

"M. Mersktus has come, father; he must have ten thousand francs at four o'clock."

"Yes, yes, immediately. I had signed those trifles for this month, true. I thought I'd found the absolute. My God, if I had a July sun, my experiment would be done!"

He gripped himself by the hair, sat down on a rickety cane arm-chair, and some tears glistened in his eyes.

"Monsieur is right!" said Lemulquinier. "All that's the fault of that rascal of a sun which is too weak—the coward, the idle fellow!"

Master and valet paid no more heed to Marguerite.

"Leave us, Mulquinier," she said.

"Ah! I've got hold of a new experiment!" cried Claes.

"My father, forget your experiments," his

The Tragedy of a Genius 213

daughter told him when they were closer ; “ you have got to pay a hundred thousand francs, and we do not possess a single farthing. Leave your laboratory to-day, your honour is concerned. What will become of you when you're in prison ? Will you soil your white hairs and the name of Claes by the infamy of a bankruptcy ? I'll oppose it. I'll have the strength to fight your madness, and it would be awful to see you without bread in your last days. Open your eyes to our position ; in fact, use your brains for once ! ”

“ Madness ! ” cried Balthazar, who got up on his legs, fixed his luminous gaze on his daughter, crossed his arms over his chest, and repeated the word “ madness ” so majestically that Marguerite trembled. “ Ah ! your mother wouldn't have uttered that word to me ! ” he went on ; “ she did not ignore the importance of my investigation, she had learnt a science so as to understand me. She knew I'm working for humanity, that there's nothing personal or sordid in me. The sentiment of a woman who loves is, I see, above filial affection. Yes, love is the most beautiful of all feelings ! Use my reason ! ” he added, striking his heart ; “ do I lack it ? Am I not myself ? We're poor, my daughter—well, I will it so. I'm your father, obey me. I'll make you rich when it pleases me. Your fortune—but it's a trifle. When I've found a dissolvent of carbon I'll fill your parlour with diamonds, and it's silly nonsense by comparison with what I'm seeking. You may well wait,

214 The Tragedy of a Genius

considering I am using myself up in gigantic efforts——”

“ My father, I have not the right to ask you to account for the four millions you’ve absorbed in this attic resultless. I’ll not speak to you of my mother whom you killed. If I had a husband I’d love him doubtless as much as my mother loved you, and I’d be ready to sacrifice all to him, as she sacrificed all. I’ve followed her orders in giving myself entirely to you ; I have proved it to you by not marrying, so as not to compel you to render me an account of your guardianship. Let’s leave the past, let’s think of the present. I came here to represent the necessity you have yourself created. We must have money for your bills of exchange, d’you understand ? There’s nothing to seize here but our ancestor, Van Claes’s portrait. So I came in my mother’s name, who was too weak to defend her children against their father, and ordered me to resist you ; I come in my brothers’ and my sister’s names. I come, my father, in the name of all the Claes, to command you to quit your experiments, to make yourself a fortune before carrying them further. If you arm yourself with your fatherhood which only makes itself felt in order to kill us, I have on my side your ancestors and honour which talk higher than chemistry. Families precede science. I have been too much your daughter ! ”

“ And so you want to be my executioner ! ” he said in a feeble voice.

The Tragedy of a Genius 215

Marguerite went off in order not to abdicate the part she had just played; she believed she had heard her mother's voice when she had said: "Don't cross your father too much, love him well!"

"Mademoiselle is making a fine job up there!" said Lemulquinier on going down to the kitchen for lunch. "We were about to lay our hands on the secret, we only wanted in addition a little July sun; for Monsieur, ah! what a man! he is, as it were, in God's own breeches! We're only so far off," he told Josette, clicking the nail of his right thumb under the tooth popularly called the palette, "from knowing the principle of everything. *Patastras!* she comes crying about stupid bills of exchange——"

"Well, pay them out of your wages," said Martha, "those bills of exchange!"

"Isn't there any butter for my bread?" Lemulquinier asked Josette.

"And money to buy it?" answered the cook tartly. "What! you old monster, if you make gold in your demon's kitchen, why don't you make yourself a little butter? It wouldn't be so difficult, and you'd sell enough at the market to keep the pot boiling. We are eating dry bread, we are! The young ladies content themselves with bread and nuts; would you then be better fed than the masters? Mademoiselle only wants to spend a hundred francs a month on the whole house; we only cook one dinner now. If you

216 The Tragedy of a Genius

want titbits you have your furnaces up there where you fricassee pearls; they talk about nothing else at the market. Make yourself roast fowls then!"

Lemulquinier took his bread and went out.

"He's going to buy something with his money," said Martha. "So much the better, it will be so much saved. Ain't he a miser, that Chinaman?—Ah! I hear Mlle Marguerite weeping. Her old wizard of a father will swallow up the house without saying a Christian word, the sorcerer! In my country he'd already have been burnt alive, but here they have no more religion than the Moors of Africa."

Mlle Claes scarce stifled her sobs as she crossed the gallery. She reached her room, looked out her mother's letter and read what follows:

"My child, if God permits, my spirit will be in your heart when you read these lines, the last I shall write! They are full of love for my dear little ones, who remain abandoned to a demon which I was unable to resist. So he has absorbed your bread, even as he devoured my life and even my love! You knew, my well-beloved, if I loved your father! I am about to die loving him less since I am taking precautions against him which I would not have avowed in my lifetime. Yes, I shall have guarded at the bottom of my coffin a last resource for the day when you will be in the last extremity of misfortune. If he has reduced you to indigence, or if your honour must be saved,

The Tragedy of a Genius 217

my child, you will find at M. de Solis's, if he still lives, if not, at his nephew's, our good Emmanuel, about one hundred and seventy thousand francs, which will help you to live.

"If nothing has been able to overcome his passion, if his children are not a stronger barrier for him than my happiness has been, and do not stay him in his criminal path, leave your father, live at least ! I could not abandon him, I owed myself to him. You, Marguerite, save the family ! I forgive you for anything you may do to defend Gabriel, Jean and Félicie. Take courage, be the tutelary angel of the Claes. Be firm, I do not dare to say, without pity ; but in order to be able to retrieve the misfortunes already incurred you must preserve some wealth and you ought to regard yourself as being relieved from poverty ; nothing will stop the fury of the passion which has robbed me of all. So, my daughter, it will be for you to be full of heart to forget your heart ; your dissembling, if you had to lie to your father, would be glorious ; your actions, though they might seem blameworthy, would be quite heroic, achieved with the aim of protecting the family. The virtuous M. de Solis told me so, and never was conscience purer or more clear-sighted than his. I should not have had the strength to say these words to you even when dying. However, be always respectful and kind in this ghastly struggle ! Resist whilst worshipping, refuse with gentleness. So I shall have had unknown tears and griefs that

218 The Tragedy of a Genius

will only burst forth after my death. Kiss my dear children in my name at the time when you will thus become their defence. May God and the Saints be with you !

“ JOSÉPHINE.”

To the letter was added a note of gratitude to MM. de Solis, uncle and nephew, who engaged to remit the deposit placed in their hands by Mme Claes to that one of her children who should represent this document to them.

“ Martha,” cried Marguerite to the duenna, who came up quickly, “ go to M. Emmanuel and ask him to come here. Noble and discreet creature ! He never said anything to me,” she thought, “ to me whose cares and griefs have become his own——”

Emmanuel came before Martha had returned.

“ You’ve had secrets from me ! ” she said, showing him the document.

Emmanuel lowered his head.

“ Oh, yes ! Be my support, you whom my mother there called ‘ our good Emmanuel,’ ” she said, showing him the letter and unable to repress a movement of joy at seeing her choice approved by her mother.

“ My blood and life belonged to you the day after I saw you in the gallery,” he said, weeping with joy and grief ; “ but I didn’t know, I didn’t dare hope you would one day accept my blood. If you know me well, you must know my word

The Tragedy of a Genius 219

is sacred. Forgive me this perfect obedience to your mother's wishes, it was not for me to judge her intentions."

"You've saved us!" she broke in, taking him by the arm to go down to the parlour.

After learning the origin of the money in Emmanuel's keeping Marguerite confided to him the sad necessity which hung over the house.

"We must go and pay the bills of exchange," said Emmanuel, "if they're all with Mersktus you'll get the interest. I'll remit you the seventy thousand francs which will remain to you. My poor uncle left me a similar sum in ducats which it will be easy to bring secretly."

"Yes," she said, "bring them at night; when my father's asleep we'll hide them for ourselves. If he knew I had money he'd perhaps do me a violence. O Emmanuel, to distrust one's father!" she said, weeping and leaning her forehead on the young man's breast.

This graceful and sad movement by which Marguerite sought protection was the first expression of a love ever enveloped in melancholy, ever bound within a sphere of pain; but this over-full heart was bound to overflow, and it was under the weight of a misery!

"What's to be done? What's to become of us? He sees nothing, cares nought about us or himself, for I don't know how he can live in that garret where the air is burning."

"What can you expect of a man who is con-

220 The Tragedy of a Genius

tinually crying, like Richard III, 'My kingdom for a horse'?" replied Emmanuel. "He'll always be un pitying, and you ought to be so also, like him. Pay his bills of exchange, give him, if you like, your fortune, but your brothers' and your sister's don't belong to you or him."

"Give my fortune?" she said, shaking Emmanuel's hand and casting a fiery glance at him. "You advise it me, you! Whilst Pierquin told a thousand lies to preserve it to me."

"Alas! Perhaps I'm selfish in my way!" he answered. "Sometimes I'd wish you without money, it seems you'd be nearer to me; sometimes I'd have you rich, happy, and I think there is smallness in believing oneself separated by the poor grandeurs of wealth."

"Dear! Don't let's talk of ourselves——"

"Ourselves!" he repeated, intoxicated. Then after a pause he added:

"The evil is great, but not irreparable."

"It will be repaired by us alone, the Claes family has no longer a head. In order to arrive at being no more either a father or a man, at having no notion of just and unjust—for he, so great, so generous, so honest, he has squandered, in spite of the loss, the property of the children whose defender he ought to be—into what abyss has he fallen? My God! what indeed is he looking for?"

"Unfortunately, my dear Marguerite, if he is wrong as head of the family, he is right scientific-

The Tragedy of a Genius 221

ally, and twenty men in Europe will admire him for what all the others will blame as madness ; but you may without scruple refuse him his children's fortune. A discovery has always been a chance. If your father is to meet with the solution of his problem he will find it without so much expense and perhaps at the moment when he despairs of it ! ”

“ My poor mother is happy ! ” said Marguerite. “ She would have suffered death a thousand times before dying, she who perished at her first collision with science. But this combat has no end——”

“ There is an end,” rejoined Emmanuel. “ When you have nothing left, M. Claes won't get any more credit and will stop.”

“ Then let him stop from to-day,” cried Marguerite ; “ we are without resources.”

M. de Solis went to redeem the bills of exchange and brought them back to Marguerite. Balthazar came down a few moments before dinner, contrary to his habit. For the first time for two years his daughter saw in his face the signs of a sadness horrible to witness ; he had again become a father, reason had driven away science. He looked into the court, into the garden, and when he was certain of being alone with his daughter he came to her with a movement full of melancholy and kindness.

“ My child,” he said, taking her hand and pressing it with an unctuous tenderness, “ forgive your old father.—Yes, Marguerite, I was wrong.

222 The Tragedy of a Genius

You alone are right. So long as I have not *discovered* I'm a wretch! I'll go away from here. I don't want to sell Van Claes," he said, pointing to the martyr's portrait. "He died for liberty, I shall die for science; he venerated, I hated——"

"Hated, my father? No," she said, throwing herself on his breast; "we all adore you.—Isn't it so, Félicie?" she said to her sister, who entered just then.

"What is the matter with you, my dear father?" said the girl, taking his hand.

"I've ruined you——"

"Eh!" said Félicie, "our brothers will make a fortune for us. Jean is always first in his form."

"Look, my father," went on Marguerite, leading Balthazar with a movement full of grace and filial coaxing to the chimney-piece, where she took some papers from under the clock, "here are your bills of exchange, but don't sign any more, there won't be anything left to pay them——"

"So you have money?" said Balthazar in Marguerite's ear, when he had recovered from his surprise.

The phrase suffocated the heroic girl. Such delirium, joy, hope was there in her father's face, who looked round him as if to discover gold.

"My father," she replied, with an accent of grief, "I have my fortune."

"Give it me!" he said, making a greedy gesture. "I shall return it you a hundredfold."

The Tragedy of a Genius 223

"Yes, I'll give it you," replied Marguerite, contemplating Balthazar, who did not understand the meaning put by his daughter into the phrase.

"Ah! my dear daughter," he said, "you're saving my life! I've imagined a last experiment, after which there is nothing more possible. If this time I don't find it, I must give up seeking the absolute. Give me your arm, come, my darling child. I'd wish to make you the happiest woman on earth; you restore me to happiness, to glory; you procure me the power of overwhelming you with treasures. I'll shower upon you jewels, riches——"

He kissed his daughter on the forehead, took her hands, clasped them, bore witness to his joy by cajoleries which seemed almost servile to Marguerite. During dinner Balthazar saw her alone, he regarded her with the eagerness, attention, liveliness which a lover shows for his mistress; if she made a movement he tried to guess her thought, her desire, and got up to serve her; he made her ashamed, he put into his attentions a kind of youth which contrasted with his premature old age. But to such cajoleries she presented a contrasting picture of actual distress, either by a word of doubt or by a glance she threw on the empty shelves in that dining-room.

"Never mind," he told her, "in six months we'll fit it all up with gold and wonders. You will be like a queen. Bah! the whole of nature will belong to us, we shall be above everything—

224 The Tragcdy of a Genius

and through you, my Marguerite—Marguerita ! ” he went on, smiling, “ your name is prophetic. Margarita means a pearl. Sterne has said so somewhere. Have you read Sterne ? Would you like a volume of Sterne ? It will amuse you.”

“ A pearl is, they say, the fruit of an illness,” she replied with bitterness, “ and we have already suffered much ! ”

“ Don’t be sad ; you’ll make the happiness of those you love ; you’ll be very powerful, very wealthy——”

“ Mademoiselle has so kind a heart ! ” said Lemulquinier, whose skimmerlike face painfully grimaced a smile.

XVI

DURING the rest of the evening Balthazar displayed to his daughters all the graces of his character and all the charm of his talk. Seductive as the serpent, his speech, his looks emitted a magnetic fluid, and he lavished that power of geniuses, that gentle spirit which fascinated Joséphine, and he set, so to speak, his daughters in his heart. When Emmanuel de Solis came, he found for the first time for a long period father and children gathered together. Despite his reserve the young principal felt the influence of the scene, for Balthazar's talk and manners were irresistible.

Although plunged in the abysses of thought and incessantly occupied in observing the moral world, scientists yet perceive the smallest details of the sphere in which they live. Rather out of time than abstracted, they are never in harmony with their surroundings, they know and forget everything ; they prejudge the future, prophesy for themselves alone, are intimate with an event before it occurs, but they have said nothing about it. If in the silence of their ponderings they have used their power to recognise what is passing around them, it suffices them to have divined

226 The Tragedy of a Genius

it; work carries them away, and they nearly always wrongly apply the knowledge they have acquired about the facts of life. Sometimes when they awaken from their social apathy, or when they fall from the moral world into the outer world, they return there with a rich memory, and are not strangers to anything.

So Balthazar, who united perspicacity of heart to perspicacity of brain, knew his daughter's whole past; he knew, or had guessed, the smallest events of the mysterious love joining her to Emmanuel; he cleverly proved it to them, and sanctioned their affection by sharing it. It was the sweetest flattery a father could convey, and the lovers could not resist it. The evening was delightful by contrast with the worries assailing these poor children's lives. When, after having, so to speak, filled them with his light and bathed them in tenderness, Balthazar retired, Emmanuel de Solis, who had had till then an embarrassed countenance, freed himself of three thousand ducats in gold, which he kept in his pockets whilst fearing to let them be noticed. He put them on Marguerite's work-basket, who covered them with the linen she was repairing, and went for the rest of the money. When he returned Félicie had gone to bed. It was just eleven. Martha, who kept awake to undress her mistress, was occupied with Félicie.

"Where should we hide it?" said Marguerite, who had not resisted the pleasure of playing

The Tragedy of a Genius 227

with a few ducats, a childish prank which ruined her !

" I'll lift up this marble column whose pedestal is hollow," said Emmanuel. " You will slip the rouleaux into it, and the devil wouldn't go and look for them there."

At the instant when Marguerite was making her last-but-one journey from the work-basket to the column she uttered a piercing cry, let the rouleaux fall, the gold pieces in which burst the paper and were scattered over the floor: her father was at the parlour door, and showed his head, whose expression of greed frightened her.

" Now what are you doing there ? " he said, looking by turns at his daughter, whom fear nailed to the floor, and the young man who had suddenly got up, but whose attitude near the column was significant enough.

The noise of the gold on the wood flooring was horrible, and its scattering seemed prophetic.

" I was not deceived," said Balthazar, sitting down. " I had heard the clink of gold——"

He was not less excited than the young people whose hearts throbbed so perfectly in unison that their movements were as much in balance as the strokes of a pendulum amid the deep silence suddenly reigning in the parlour.

" I thank you, M. de Solis," said Marguerite to Emmanuel, casting him a glance, meaning, " Back me up, so as to save the money."

" What ! this gold——? " continued Balthazar,

228 The Tragedy of a Genius

turning looks of a fearful clearness on his daughter and Emmanuel.

"The gold belongs to Monsieur, who has the kindness to lend it me in order to honour our engagements," she answered him.

M. de Solis reddened and wanted to leave.

"Sir," said Balthazar, stopping him by the arm, "don't avoid my gratitude."

"Sir, you owe me nothing. The money belongs to Mlle Marguerite, who is borrowing it from me on her property," he replied, looking at his mistress, who thanked him by an imperceptible closing of the eyelids.

"I can't stand that," said Claes, taking a pen and a sheet of paper on the table where Félicie used to write.

And turning to the astounded young couple :
"How much is there ?"

Passion had made Balthazar more wary than the astutest of swindling stewards would have been ; the money was to belong to him. Marguerite and M. de Solis wavered.

"Let's count," he said.

"There are six thousand ducats," answered Emmanuel.

"Seventy thousand francs," rejoined Claes. Marguerite's glance at her lover gave him courage.

"Sir," he said with respect, "your engagement is without value, pardon me this purely technical expression ; I lent Mademoiselle this morning

The Tragedy of a Genius 229

one hundred thousand francs to redeem the bills of exchange which you were unable to pay, so you could not give me any guarantee. These hundred and seventy thousand francs belong to Mademoiselle your daughter, who may dispose of them as she pleases, but I only lend them to her on the promise she has made me to sign a contract by which I can take my sureties on her share in the bare estates of Waignies."

Marguerite turned aside her head to hide the tears that came; she knew the pureness of heart which distinguished Emmanuel. Brought up by his uncle in the severest practice of the religious virtues, the young man had an especial horror of a lie; so after offering Marguerite his life and heart, he made her the additional sacrifice of his conscience.

"Good-bye, sir," said Balthazar to him. "I thought you would have had more trust in a man who regarded you with a father's eyes."

After exchanging a mournful glance with Marguerite, Emmanuel was escorted out by Martha, who shut the street door. When father and daughter were quite alone Claes said to her:

"You love me, don't you?"

"Don't go a roundabout way, my father; you want this money? You won't have it."

She began collecting the ducats; her father helped her silently in picking them up and verifying the amount she had scattered, and Marguerite let him do it without exhibiting the least distrust.

230 The Tragedy of a Genius

The ducats being gathered in piles, Balthazar said, with a desperate air :

"Marguerite, I must have that gold !"

"It would be a theft if you took it," she answered coldly. "Listen, my father ; it would be better to kill us at a blow than make us endure a thousand deaths daily. See to it which of you, which of us, must succumb——"

"Then you'll have murdered your father !" he rejoined.

"We shall have avenged our mother," she said, pointing to the spot where Mme Claes had died.

"My daughter, if you knew what was in question you wouldn't speak such words to me. Listen, I'm about to explain to you the problem—but you wouldn't understand me," he cried in despair. "Now, do give it me ! Trust your father this once. Yes, I know I caused your mother pain, that I have squandered, to use the word of ignoramuses, my own fortune and spoilt yours ; that you're all working for what you term a madness ; but, my angel, my well-beloved, my love, my Marguerite, listen to me now ! If I don't succeed I hand myself over to you, I'll obey you as you ought—you—to obey me ; I'll do your will, I'll give you the management of my fortune, I'll be no longer the guardian of my children, I'll strip myself of all authority. I swear it by your mother !" he said, bursting into tears.

The Tragedy of a Genius 231

Marguerite turned her head, so as not to see that weeping face, and Claes threw himself at his daughter's knees, thinking she was about to yield.

"Marguerite, Marguerite ! Give, give ! What are sixty thousand francs to escape eternal remorse ? You see, I'll die ; this will kill me. Listen to me ! my word will be sacred. If I fail, I renounce my labours ; I'll quit Flanders, even France, if you demand it, and I'll go and work as a manual labourer in order to make a fortune, penny by penny, and to restore one day to my children what science has taken from them."

Marguerite wanted to raise up her father, but he persisted in remaining on his knees, and he added, weeping :

"Be for a last time tender and devoted ! If I don't succeed I'll myself admit you're right to be hard. You'll call me an old madman ! You will call me a bad father ! In fine, you'll tell me I'm an ignoramus ! I, when I hear the words, will kiss your hands. You can beat me if you like ; and when you strike me I'll bless you as the best of daughters, remembering you've given me your blood !"

"If my blood alone were concerned I'd give it you," she cried, "but can I let my brothers and my sister be murdered by science ? No ! Stop, stop !" she said, wiping away her tears and repelling her father's caressing hands.

"Sixty thousand francs and two months,"

232 The Tragedy of a Genius

he said, rising in a rage. "I don't want more than that! But my daughter puts herself between glory, wealth, and myself. Be accursed!" he added. "You are neither daughter nor woman, you have no heart! You'll be neither mother nor wife! Let me take it! Say yes, my dear little thing, my darling child! I'll worship you," he said, thrusting his hand on to the gold with a movement of atrocious energy.

"I'm defenceless against force, but God and the great Claes behold us!" said Marguerite, pointing to the portrait.

"Very good! Try to go on living covered with your father's blood!" cried Balthazar, casting her a look of horror.

He got up, looked round the parlour, and went out slowly. Reaching the door he turned round, as a beggar would have done, and interrogated his daughter by a gesture which Marguerite answered by a negative shake of the head.

"Good-bye, my daughter!" he said with gentleness. "Try and live happy."

When he had gone Marguerite remained in a stupor which isolated her from the earth; she was no longer in the parlour, she no longer felt her body, she had wings and flew through spaces of the moral world, where all is immense, where thought draws together both distances and times, where some divine hand lifts the veil of the future. It seemed to her that whole days passed between each of the steps of her father

The Tragedy of a Genius 233

as he mounted the stairs ; then she had a shudder of horror at the moment she heard him entering his room. Guided by a presentiment flooding her soul with the poignant clearness of a lightning flash, she went up the stairs without a light, without noise, with the speed of an arrow, and saw her father pointing a pistol to his forehead.

" Take everything ! " she cried to him, dashing forward.

She fell into an arm-chair. Balthazar, seeing how pale she was, began weeping as old men weep ; he became again a child, he kissed her on the forehead, uttered incoherent words to her ; he was near jumping with joy, and seemed to want to play with her as a lover plays with his mistress after obtaining some happiness from her.

" Enough ! Enough, my father ! " she said ; " think of your promise ! If you don't succeed, you'll obey me ? "

" Yes."

" O, my mother ! " she exclaimed, turning to Mme Claes's room, " you'd have given everything, wouldn't you ? "

" Sleep in peace," said Balthazar, " you're a good daughter."

" Sleep," she rejoined. " I no longer enjoy the nights of my youth ; you're ageing me, my father, even as you slowly broke my mother's heart——"

" Poor child, I'd like to comfort you by ex-

234 The Tragedy of a Genius

plaining the effects of the magnificent experiment I've just imagined, you'd understand——"

"I only understand our ruin," she said as she went.

Next morning, which was breaking-up day, Emmanuel de Solis brought back Jean.

"Well?" he said, with sadness, addressing Marguerite.

"I gave in," she answered.

"My dear life," he said, with a movement of melancholy joy, "if you'd resisted I'd have admired you; but weak, I worship you!"

"Poor, poor Emmanuel, what will remain for us?"

"Let me deal with things," cried the young man, with a radiant air, "we love one another, all will go well!"

Some months slipped by in perfect calm. M. de Solis gave Marguerite to understand that his scanty economies would never be a fortune, and advised her to live at ease taking for the purpose of keeping up plenty in the house the money remaining over from the sum of which he had been the depositary. During this period Marguerite was delivered over to worries which had formerly agitated her mother in similar circumstances. However incredulous she might be she had arrived at the state of hope in her father's genius. By an inexplicable phenomenon a good many people have hope without having faith. Hope is the flower of desire, faith is the fruit of cer-

The Tragedy of a Genius 235

tainty. Marguerite would say: "If my father succeeds we'll be happy!" Claes and Lemulquinier alone said: "We shall succeed!"

Unhappily Balthazar's visage grew gloomier from day to day. When he came to dine he sometimes did not dare look at his daughter, and sometimes he cast at her likewise glances of triumph. Marguerite employed her evenings in getting young De Solis to explain to her several legal difficulties. She overwhelmed her father with questions about their family relations. In fact, she finished her man's education, she was evidently preparing to execute the plan she meditated, if her father succumbed yet again in his duel with the *Unknown* (x).

At the beginning of July Balthazar spent a whole day seated on the garden bench, buried in sad meditation. He several times looked at the bed denuded of tulips, the window of his wife's room; he doubtless shivered as he thought of all his struggle had cost him; his movements testified to thoughts outside science. Marguerite came to sit and work near him a few moments before dinner.

"Well, my father, you've not succeeded?"

"No, my child——"

"Ah!" said Marguerite in a soft voice, "I'll not address you the lightest reproach, we're equally guilty. I'll only claim the fulfilment of your word, it must be sacred: you're a Claes. Your children will encircle you with love and

236 The Tragedy of a Genius

respect, but from to-day you belong to me and owe me obedience. Don't worry, my reign will be gentle, and I'll even work so as to end it quickly. I'll take Martha, I'll leave you for about a month and it's about your business; for," she added, kissing him on the forehead, "you're my child. To-morrow, therefore, Félicie will manage the house. The poor girl is only seventeen, she couldn't resist you; be generous, don't ask her for a farthing, because she'll only have the strictly needful for household expenses. Summon up courage, give up your labours and your ideas for two or three years. The problem will ripen, I'll have collected the money necessary to solve it and you will solve it. Eh, well! isn't your queen clement, tell me?"

"Then everything isn't lost!" said the old man.

"No, if you're true to your word."

"I'll obey you, my daughter," answered Claes, with deep emotion.

Next day M. Conyncks came from Cambrai to fetch his niece. He was in a travelling-carriage and only wanted to stop at his cousin's for the time needed by Marguerite and Martha to make their preparations. M. Claes received his cousin affably, but he was visibly sad and dejected. Old Conyncks guessed Balthazar's thoughts, and during lunch told him with rough frankness:

"I've some of your pictures, cousin; I've a

The Tragedy of a Genius 237

taste for fine pictures, it's a ruinous passion, but we all have our mania——"

"Dear uncle!" said Marguerite.

"You're said to be ruined, cousin; but a Claes has always some treasure there," he said, tapping his forehead, "and there, isn't it so?" he added, pointing to his heart. "So I reckon on you! I found in my purse a few crowns I've put at your service."

"Ah!" cried Balthazar, "I'll give you treasures in return——"

"The only treasures we possess in Flanders, cousin, are patience and work," answered Conyncks severely. "Our ancestor has those two words engraved on his forehead," he added, pointing to President Van Claes's portrait.

XVII

MARGUERITE kissed her father, bade him good-bye, gave her instructions to Josette, to Félicie, and departed for Paris by post-stage. The grand-uncle, now a widower, had only a daughter of twelve, and possessed a huge fortune; it was therefore not impossible he might want to marry: so the inhabitants of Douai thought Mlle Claes was marrying her grand-uncle. The rumour of this rich marriage brought back the notary Pierquin to the Claeses.

Great changes had occurred in that excellent calculator's ideas. Since two years the society of the town had been divided into two hostile camps. The nobility had formed a first circle and the burgessry a second, naturally very hostile to the first. This sudden separation, which took place in the whole of France and split it into two inimical nations whose jealous irritations went on increasing, was one of the chief reasons that brought about the adoption of the Revolution of July, 1830, in the provinces. Between those two societies, one of which was ultra-monarchical and the other ultra-liberal, were the functionaries admitted according to their importance into one

240 The Tragedy of a Genius

long for. So Pierquin returned to the Claeses with a secret purpose of making the sacrifices needful to reach the conclusion of a marriage which henceforth realised all his ambitions. He kept company with Balthazar and Félicie during Marguerite's absence, but he tardily recognised a redoubtable competitor in Emmanuel de Solis. The estate bequeathed by the defunct abbé was said to be considerable, and in the eyes of a man who naively ciphered up all things in life the young heir seemed more powerful through his money than through the seductions of his heart, about which Pierquin never troubled himself. That fortune restored to the name of De Solis its whole value. Gold and nobility were like two lustres which, lighting each other, redoubled the splendour.

The sincere affection shown by the young headmaster to Félicie, whom he treated like a sister, aroused the notary's emulation. He tried to eclipse Emmanuel by mixing modish slang and the expressions of a superficial gallantry with the dreamy airs, the careworn elegies that suited his physiognomy so well. Calling himself disenchanted with the whole world, he would turn his eyes upon Félicie in such a way as to make her believe she alone could reconcile him with life. Félicie, to whom for the first time a man addressed compliments, listened to this language which is always so pleasant even when it is mendacious ; she took emptiness for depth, and in the need that

The Tragedy of a Genius 241

oppressed her of fixing the vague feelings with which her heart was overflowing she occupied herself with her cousin. Jealous unwittingly to herself perhaps of the loving attentions lavished by Emmanuel on her sister, she doubtless wished to see herself also the object of a man's looks, thoughts, and cares. Pierquin readily perceived the preference Félicie gave him over Emmanuel, and it was to him a reason for persisting in his efforts in such a manner that he became more involved than he intended. Emmanuel watched the beginnings of the passion, a sham with the notary, a childlike truth with Félicie, whose future was at stake. Then followed between the two cousins some pleasant talks, some words whispered behind Emmanuel's back—in fine, those small deceptions which lend to a look, to a word, an expression whose insidious sweetness may give rise to innocent mistakes.

Pierquin, under cover of his commerce with Félicie, tried to get at the secret of Marguerite's journey in order to ascertain if it concerned marriage and if he must give up his hopes ; but despite his clumsy cleverness neither Balthazar nor Félicie could give him any information, for the reason that they knew nothing of Marguerite's plans who, when taking over the reins of power, seemed to have followed its maxims by silence about her projects.

Balthazar's mournful gloom and his dejection made the evenings difficult to spend. Although

242 The Tragedy of a Genius

Emmanuel had succeeded in inducing the chemist to play tric-trac Balthazar's mind was absent from the game ; and most of the time this man, so great through his intelligence, appeared stupid. Fallen from his hopes, humbled at having devoured three fortunes, a gambler without money, he bent under the weight of his mind, under the burden of his hopes less destroyed than disappointed. This man of genius, muzzled by necessity, condemning himself, offered a truly tragic spectacle which would have touched the most callous man. Pierquin himself did not contemplate without a feeling of respect the caged lion whose eyes, full of a repressed power, had become calm by dint of sadness, dull by dint of light ; whose glances begged for alms which the mouth did not dare suggest. Sometimes a flash passed over the wizened face which was revived by the conception of a new experiment ; then, if whilst gazing round the parlour Balthazar's eyes stopped at the place where his wife had died, scanty tears would flow like burning grains of sand in the desert of his eyes made immense by thought, and his head would fall on his chest. He had lifted the world like a Titan, and the world returned more heavily on his breast. This gigantic grief so virilely restrained influenced Pierquin and Emmanuel, who at times felt moved enough to wish to offer this man the sum needed for some series of experiments ; so communicative are the convictions of genius ! Both of them could conceive how Mme

The Tragedy of a Genius 243

Claes and Marguerite had thrown millions into that gulf, but reason promptly stayed the impulses of the heart and their emotions were transformed into consolations which embittered yet more the agonies of the lightning-struck Titan.

Claes did not speak of his eldest daughter, and did not worry about her absence or her silence in writing neither to him nor to Félicie. When Solis and Pierquin asked him for news of her he seemed disagreeably affected. Did he foresee that Marguerite was acting against him? Was he humiliated by having resigned to his child a father's majestic rights? Had he come to love her less because she was going to be the father and he the child? Perhaps there were many of such causes and many of such inexpressible sentiments which pass like clouds over the soul, in the mute disgrace which he made to weigh on Marguerite. However great great men, known and unknown, may be, happy or unhappy in their efforts, they have pettinesses by which they belong to humanity. By a double misfortune they suffer no less by their qualities than by their faults, and perhaps Balthazar had to familiarise himself with the pains of his wounded vanities. So the life he led and the evenings during which those four persons were gathered together in Marguerite's absence were a life and evenings impressed with sadness, filled with dim fears. They were days barren as a parched-up country where yet they gleaned a few flowers, rare consolations. The atmosphere seemed

244 The Tragedy of a Genius

to them foggy in the absence of the eldest daughter, become the soul, hope and strength of the family.

Two months passed like that during which Balthazar patiently awaited his daughter. Marguerite was brought back to Douai by her uncle, who remained at the house instead of returning to Cambrai, doubtless so as to support with his authority some *coup d'état* meditated by his niece. The notary and M. de Solis had been invited to dinner by Félicie and Balthazar. When the travelling-carriage stopped at the house door, these four persons came to welcome the travellers with great demonstrations of joy. Marguerite seemed happy to see the paternal hearth again, her eyes filled with tears when she crossed the court to the parlour. When kissing her father her young woman's caresses were nevertheless not without afterthought, she reddened like a guilty spouse who does not know how to feign, but her looks resumed their purity when she glanced at M. de Solis, from whom she seemed to derive the strength to finish the undertaking she had secretly planned.

During dinner, despite the cheerfulness of their faces and words, father and daughter examined each other with distrust and curiosity. Balthazar did not put any question to Marguerite about her stay in Paris, doubtless from paternal dignity. Emmanuel de Solis imitated this reserve. But Pierquin, who was used to know all the family

The Tragedy of a Genius 245

secrets, said to Marguerite, covering his inquisitiveness by a sham joviality :

" Well, dear cousin, you've seen Paris, the sights——? "

" I saw nothing in Paris," she replied. " I didn't go there for amusement. The days went by drearily for me, I was too impatient to see Douai again."

" If I hadn't got offended, she wouldn't have come to the Opéra, where, by the way, she was bored ! " said M. Conyncks.

The evening was painful, everyone was embarrassed, smiled uneasily or tried to show the fictitious gaiety that hides genuine anxieties. Marguerite and Balthazar were a prey to dull, cruel fears which reacted on their hearts. As the evening wore on, the father's and daughter's faces changed. Marguerite sometimes tried to smile, but her gestures, her looks, the sound of her voice betrayed a lively inquietude. MM. Conyncks and De Solis seemed to know the cause of the secret movements agitating the noble young woman, and appeared to encourage her by expressive glances. Hurt at having been left out in the cold about a decision and measures accomplished on his behalf, Balthazar gradually withdrew from his children and friends, affecting to keep silent. Marguerite was doubtless about to reveal to him what she had decided for him. For a great man, for a father, the position was intolerable.

246 The Tragedy of a Genius

So having reached an age at which there is no dissembling, even among one's children, at which the extension of the ideas lends strength to the feelings, he became graver and graver, more reflective and distressed as he saw the period of his civil death drawing nigh. That evening concluded one of those crises of the inward life which can only be explained by images. Clouds and thunder were threatening in the sky, people were laughing in the fields; everyone was hot, felt the storm, raised their heads and went on their ways. M. Conyncks was the first to go to bed, and was escorted by Balthazar to his room. In his absence Pierquin and M. de Solis went away. Marguerite bade a farewell full of affection to the notary. She said nothing to Emmanuel, but she pressed his hand, bestowing on him a moist glance. She sent Félicie away, and when Claes returned to the parlour he found his daughter there alone. "My kind father," she said to him in a trembling voice, "it needed the serious circumstances in which we are for me to leave the house; but, after much anguish and after surmounting incredible difficulties, I return with some chances of salvation for us all. Thanks to your name, to our uncle's influence and to M. de Solis's protection we have got for you a berth as receiver of revenues in Brittany; it's worth, they say, eighteen to twenty thousand francs a year. Our uncle has given the security.—

The Tragedy of a Genius 247

Here's your nomination," she added, taking a letter from her bag. "Your stopping here during your years of privation and sacrifices would be intolerable. Our father must remain in a position at least equal to that in which he has always lived.

"I shall not ask for any of your income, you'll use it as you please. I only beg you to reflect that we have not a halfpenny of income, and that we'll all live on what Gabriel will grant us out of his revenue. The town will know nothing of our cloistral life. If you were here at home, you'd be a hindrance to the means we, my sister and I, shall use to attempt to restore prosperity. Is it abusing the authority you've given me to place you in a position to re-make your fortune yourself? In a few years, if you wish, you'll be receiver-general."

"So, Marguerite," said Balthazar gently, "you're driving me out of my house——"

"I don't deserve so harsh a reproach," answered the girl, repressing her heart's tumultuous throbs. "You'll return among us when you can dwell in your native town as it befits you to appear there. Besides, my father, haven't I your word?" she went on coldly. "You must obey me. My uncle has stopped to take you to Brittany, so that you may not go the journey alone."

"I'll not go!" cried Balthazar, getting up. "I have no need of anyone's help to restore my fortune and pay what I owe my children."

248 The Tragedy of a Genius.

"It will be better," rejoined Marguerite, without excitement. "I'll only pray you to consider our respective situations, which I'm going to put to you in few words. If you remain in this house your children will leave it, so as to leave you master of it."

"Marguerite!" cried Balthazar.

"Next," she continued, without wanting to notice her father's irritation, "the minister would have to be informed of your refusal, if you don't accept a lucrative and honourable berth which, despite our endeavours and patronages, we should not have got without some thousand franc notes my uncle adroitly inserted in a lady's glove——"

"You to leave me!"

"Either you'll leave us or we'll run away from you," she replied. "If I were your only child I'd imitate my mother without murmuring against the fate you brought on me. But my sister and brothers shall not perish of hunger or despair near you. I promised it to her who died there," she said, pointing to her mother's bed. "We've hidden our griefs, we've suffered in silence; to-day our strength is used up. We are not at the edge of an abyss, we're at the bottom, my father! To drag us out of it not only is courage needed, but it is also necessary that our efforts should not be continually thwarted by the whims of a passion——"

"My dear children!" cried Balthazar, grasping

The Tragedy of a Genius 249

Marguerite's hand, "I'll help you, I'll work, I——"

"Here are the means," she answered, handing him the minister's letter.

"But, my angel, the means you offer me of repairing my fortune is too slow! You make me love the fruit of the year's work and the huge sums represented by my laboratory. There," he said, indicating the attic, "are all our resources."

Marguerite walked to the door saying—

"My father, you will choose!"

"Ah! my daughter, you're very hard!" he replied, sitting in an arm-chair and letting her go.

Next morning Marguerite learnt through Lemulquinier that M. Claes had gone out. The mere announcement made her grow pale, and her countenance was so cruelly significant that the old valet said:

"Be calm, Mademoiselle. Monsieur said he'd return at eleven for lunch. He didn't go to bed. At two a.m. he was still up in the parlour looking through the windows at the roofs of the laboratory. I was waiting in the kitchen. I saw him, he was crying, he is in grief. Here is the famous month of July during which the sun is capable of enriching us all, and if you wished——"

"Enough!" said Marguerite, divining all the thoughts that must have assailed her father.

Indeed, there had occurred a phenomenon in Balthazar which seizes on all sedentary persons.

250 The Tragedy of a Genius

His life depended, as it were, on the places with which he had been identified; his thought, married to his laboratory and house, made them indispensable to him, as is the Stock Exchange to the gambler, for whom public holidays are days lost. There were his hopes, there then descended from the heavens the only atmosphere in which his lungs could breathe in the air of life. This alliance between places and things and men, so strong in weak natures, becomes almost tyrannical among scientists and students. To leave his house was for Balthazar to give up science, give up his problem, it meant dying.

Marguerite was a prey to extreme agitation up to lunch-time. The scene which had led Balthazar to want to kill himself had come back to her memory, and she feared to see a tragic solution of her father's desperate situation. She went to and fro in the parlour, trembling at every ring at the door bell. At length Balthazar returned. Whilst he was crossing the court Marguerite, who was studying his face with disquiet, only saw on it the manifestation of a tempestuous grief. When he entered the parlour she came to him to wish him good day; he seized her affectionately by the waist, pressed her to his heart, kissed her on the forehead, and whispered in her ear:

"I went to ask for my passport."

The sound of her father's voice, his resigned look, his movement, all crushed the poor girl's

The Tragedy of a Genius 251

heart, who turned her head to hide her tears, but, unable to repress them, she went into the garden and returned, after crying there at her ease. During lunch Balthazar showed himself cheerful as a man who had chosen his part.

"So we're going to Brittany, my uncle?" he said to M. Conyncks. "I've always desired to see the country."

"You live cheap there," answered the old uncle.

"Our father leaving us?" cried Félicie.

M. de Solis entered, bringing Jean.

"You'll leave him with us to-day," said Balthazar, placing his son near him. "I'm off to-morrow, and I want to bid him good-bye."

Emmanuel looked at Marguerite, who lowered her head. It was a dreary day, during which everyone was gloomy and repressed their thoughts or tears. It was not an absence, but an exile. Besides, all felt instinctively what humiliation there was for a father thus to declare publicly his disasters by accepting a berth and leaving his family at Balthazar's age. He alone was as great as Marguerite was firm, and seemed nobly to accept this penitence for faults which the sway of genius had caused him to commit. When the evening was over and father and daughter were alone, Balthazar, who, during the whole day had shown himself tender and loving as he had been during the beautiful days of his patriarchal life, held out his hand to Marguerite,

252 The Tragedy of a Genius

and said to her, with a kind of affection blent with despair :

" Are you contented with your father ? "

" You are worthy of that one ! " answered Marguerite, pointing to Van Claes's portrait.

XVIII

NEXT morning Balthazar, followed by Lemulquinier, went up to the laboratory as if to say farewell to the hopes he had cherished and which his commenced operations showed him in all their livingness. Master and valet cast each other a glance full of melancholy on entering the garret they were perchance about to quit for ever. Balthazar gazed at the machines over which his thinking had so long hovered, and each of which was bound to the memory of an investigation or an experiment. He mournfully ordered Lemulquinier to make the gases or dangerous acids evaporate, to separate substances which might have produced explosions. Whilst taking these precautions he gave vent to bitter regrets, such as are expressed by one condemned to death, before going to the scaffold.

"But here," he said, stopping before a capsule in which were dipped the two threads of a voltaic pile, "here's an experiment whose result ought to be waited for. If it succeeded, dreadful thought! my children would not drive away from his house a father who would cast diamonds at their feet.—There's a combination of carbon and sulphur," he added, speaking to himself, "in

254 The Tragedy of a Genius

which the carbon plays the part of an electro-positive body ; the crystallisation should begin at the negative pile ; in case of decomposition the carbon would reach it crystallised——”

“ Ah ! that’s how it would be ! ” said Lemulquinier, admiringly staring at his master.

“ Now,” went on Balthazar after a pause, “ the combination is subjected to the influence of this pile which may act——”

“ If Monsieur wishes I’m going to increase its effect——”

“ No, no, it must be left as it is. Rest and time are conditions essential to crystallisation——”

“ Gracious ! it must take its time, that crystallisation,” cried the valet.

“ Should the temperature lower, the sulphide of carbon will crystallise,” said Balthazar, continuing to express in fragments the distinct ideas of a meditation complete in his understanding ; “ but if the action of the pile operates in certain conditions I do not know—that would have to be watched—it’s possible. But what am I thinking of ? It’s no more a question of chemistry, my friend, we have to go and manage a receivership in Brittany——”

Claes hurried out and went down for a last family lunch, at which Pierquin and M. de Solis were present. Balthazar, anxious to have done with his scientific agony, said good-bye to his children and got into the carriage with his uncle ; the whole family escorted him to the threshold of

The Tragedy of a Genius 255

the door. After Marguerite had there kissed her father in a despairing embrace, to which he replied by whispering in her ear, "You're a good girl and I'll never be angry with you!" she crossed the court, ran into the parlour, knelt at the spot where her mother died, and prayed ardently to God to ask Him for the strength to fulfil the hard toil of her new life. She was already fortified by an inward voice which had poured into her heart the praise of the angels and the thanks of her mother, when her sister, her brother, Emmanuel and Pierquin returned into the house after gazing at the carriage till it was out of sight.

"Now, Mademoiselle, what are you going to do?" said Pierquin.

"Save the house," she replied simply. "We own nearly thirteen hundred acres at Waignies. My intention is to have them cleared, to split them into three farms, construct the buildings needful for their exploitation, and let them; and I think in a few years with much economy and patience each of us," she said, pointing to her sister and brother, "will have a farm of four hundred odd acres which may be worth one day nearly fifteen thousand francs a year. My brother Gabriel will keep for his share this house and whatever he possesses on the ledger. Then we shall one day give our father back his fortune, free of all obligations, devoting our incomes to the payment of his debts."

258 The Tragedy of a Genius

and the most devoted of our relations. In the circumstances our behaviour must be of irreproachable severity. So here we are for a long time devoted to work and solitude."

Silence prevailed a few instants. Emmanuel, absorbed in contemplating Marguerite's head, seemed dumb; Pierquin did not know what to say. He took leave of his cousin, feeling in a rage with himself; he had suddenly divined that Marguerite loved Emmanuel, and that he had just behaved like a regular fool.

"Ah! Pierquin, my friend," he apostrophised himself in the street, "the man who'd tell you you were a brute and a beast would be right. How stupid I am! I have twelve thousand livres income, apart from my charge, without reckoning my uncle Des Racquets's inheritance, whose heir I am and who will double my fortune some day (well, I don't want him to die, he's thrifty!), and I have the infamy to ask interest of Mlle Claes! I'm sure those two are now mocking at me. I mustn't think any more of Marguerite! No. After all, Félicie is a kind, gentle creature, who suits me better. Marguerite has an iron character, she'd want to dominate me, and she'd do so! Come, let's show ourselves generous, don't let's be so much of a notary! By Jove! I'm going to start loving Félicie and I'll stick to it!—Great heavens! she'll have a farm of four hundred and thirty acres, which will be presently worth between fifteen and twenty thousand livres a year, for the

The Tragedy of a Genius 259

Wagnies estates are good property. When my uncle Des Racquets dies, poor old chap ! I'll sell my business and I'll then be worth fifty thousand livres a year. My wife is a Claes, I'm related to good families. The deuce ! We'll see if the Courtevelles, the Magalhens, the Savaron de Savaruses will refuse to come to a Pierquin-Claes-Molina-Nourho ! I'll be mayor of Douai, I'll have the cross, I may be deputy, I'll be everything. Ah ! Pierquin, old fellow, keep to that, don't commit any more stupidities, the more so as, upon my word, Félicie—Mlle Félicie Van Claes—loves you."

When the lovers were alone Emmanuel gave his hand to Marguerite, who could not help placing hers right in it. They got up simultaneously and went towards their bench in the garden ; but in the middle of the parlour the lover could not resist his delight, and in a voice trembling through emotion said to Marguerite :

"I have three hundred thousand francs of yours——"

"What !" she cried, "did my poor mother entrust you with more money ?—No.—What ?"

"O my Marguerite, does not what belongs to me belong to you ? Was it not you who were the first to say 'we' ?"

"Dear Emmanuel !" she said, pressing the hand she still held.

And instead of going to the garden she threw herself into the easy chair.

260 The Tragedy of a Genius

"Isn't it for me to thank you," he said with a voice of love, "since you accept?"

"This moment," she said, "my dear, well-beloved, effaces many griefs and brings a happy future near! Yes, I accept your fortune," she went on, an angelic smile straying over her lips. "I know the way to make it mine."

She gazed at Van Claes's portrait as if to have a witness. The young man who followed Marguerite's looks did not see her taking off her finger a young girl's ring, and only perceived the gesture when he heard these words:

"Amid our deep distress a happiness arises. My father out of indifference leaves me the free disposal of myself," she said, handing over the ring. "Take it, Emmanuel! My mother was fond of you, she would have chosen you."

Tears came to Emmanuel's eyes, he grew pale, fell on his knees, and said to Marguerite, giving her a ring he always wore:

"Here is my mother's wedding-ring! My Marguerite," he went on, kissing the ring, "shall I only have this as a pledge?"

She stooped to bring her forehead near Emmanuel's lips.

"Alas! my poor beloved, are we not doing something wrong now?" she said in agitation; "for we shall have to wait long."

"My uncle said worship was the daily bread of patience, speaking of a Christian who loves God. I may love you thus, I have long confounded

The Tragedy of a Genius 261

you with the Lord of all: I am yours as I am His."

They remained some moments plunged in the sweetest exaltation. Félicie came back too early for them. Emmanuel, enlightened by the delicious tact which makes everything divined in love, left the sisters by themselves after exchanging with Marguerite a look in which she could see what such discreetness cost him.

"Come here, little sister," said Marguerite, taking Félicie round the neck.

Then, drawing her into the garden, they went and sat on the bench to which each generation had entrusted its words of love, its sighs of grief, its meditations and plans. Despite her sister's glad tones and the loving clearness of her smile, Félicie felt something like fear. Marguerite took her hand and felt it tremble.

"Mademoiselle Félicie," said the elder, approaching her sister's ear, "I read your soul. Pierquin has come often in my absence, he has come every night, he has talked pleasant words and you have listened to them——"

Félicie blushed.

"Don't deny it, my angel," went on Marguerite; "it's so natural to love! Perhaps your dear soul will change somewhat your cousin's nature; he is egoistic, selfish, but an honest man, and doubtless his defects will help your happiness. He'll love you as the prettiest of his properties, you'll become part of his business. Forgive me

262 The Tragedy of a Genius

that phrase, dear friend ! you'll correct him of the bad habits he's got through only seeing interests everywhere, by teaching him the affairs of the heart."

Félicie could only kiss her sister.

" Besides," resumed Marguerite, " he has wealth. His family is of the highest and oldest burgessry. But would I oppose your happiness even if you intend to find it in a mediocre station of life ? "

Félicie cried :

" Dear sister ! "

" Oh, yes, you can trust me," said Marguerite. " What more natural than to exchange secrets ? "

This phrase, full of soul, brought about one of those delicious chats in which young women tell each other all. When Marguerite, whom love had made an expert, had recognised Félicie's state of heart she at last said :

" Well, my dear child, let's be sure the cousin truly loves you, and then——"

" Let me do it," answered Félicie, laughing.

" I've my models ! "

" You silly ! " said Marguerite, kissing her on the forehead.

Although Pierquin belonged to the class of men who see in marriage obligations the fulfilment of social laws and a mode of transmission of property ; although it was indifferent to him whether he married Félicie or Marguerite, if one and the other had the same name and the same dowry, he ye

The Tragedy of a Genius 263

perceived that both were, according to one of his expressions, "*romantic and sentimental girls*"—two adjectives which unemotional people use to jeer at—the gifts sown by nature with a parsimonious hand over the furrows of mankind; the notary doubtless said to himself he must howl with the wolves, and next day he visited Marguerite, took her mysteriously into the little garden, and began to talk sentiment, since it was one of the clauses of the primitive contract which must precede the notarial contract in the laws of the world.

"Dear cousin," he said to her, "we have not always been of the same opinion as to means to be taken for reaching a happy settlement of your affairs; but you should recognise to-day I've ever been guided by a great desire to be useful to you. Well, yesterday I spoilt my offers by a fatal habit engrained in us by the *notary spirit*, d'you understand?—My heart was not an accomplice of my silliness. I loved you well, but we, we have a certain clear sight, and I've noticed I don't please you. It's my fault! Another would have been cleverer than I. Well, I've come to tell you quite frankly I feel a real love for your sister Félicie. So treat me as a brother! Use my purse! The more you take the more friendship you'll show. I'm quite at your disposal, *without interest*, d'you understand? neither at twelve nor a quarter per cent. Let me be thought worthy of Félicie and I'll be content. Forgive me my faults, they only come from business practices; my heart is good, and

264 The Tragedy of a Genius

I'd rather throw myself in the Scarpe than not make my wife happy."

"That's first-rate, cousin!" said Marguerite; "but my sister depends on herself and our father."

"I know it, my dear cousin," rejoined the notary; "but you're the mother of the whole family."

Marguerite accepted his help but only in what concerned his profession so as not to compromise at all her dignity as a woman, or her sister's future, or her father's decisions. On that same day she confided her sister to Josette and Martha, who vowed themselves body and soul to their young mistress whilst backing up her schemes of economy. Marguerite went off at once to Waignies, where she began her operations, which were cleverly directed by Pierquin.

Self-sacrifice had been ciphered up in the notary's mind as an excellent speculation, so his trouble in the undertaking was in some sort an investment in which he did not want to economise. First of all he tried to spare Marguerite the bother of having the land intended for farms cleared and tilled. He talked to three young sons of rich farmers who desired to establish themselves; he attracted them by the prospect offered by the fertility of the estates, and succeeded in getting them to take on lease the three farms that were going to be built. By giving up the price of the farms for three years, the farmers were induced to promise ten thousand francs rent in the fourth year, twelve

The Tragedy of a Genius 265

thousand in the sixth, and fifteen thousand during the rest of the lease, whilst digging the ditches, making the plantations, and buying the cattle. Whilst the farms were built the farmers came and cleared their estates.

Four years after Balthazar's departure, Marguerite had already almost restored her brother's and her sister's fortunes. Two hundred thousand francs sufficed to pay for all the building. Neither help nor advice were wanting to the brave girl, whose conduct excited the town's admiration. Marguerite superintended her buildings, the execution of her bargains and her leases with the good sense, the activity, the perseverance which women can exhibit when they are animated by a great sentiment. In the fifth year she was able to devote thirty thousand francs income yielded by the farms, her brother's income, and the product of her father's property, to the liquidation of the mortgaged capitals, and to the repair of the injuries inflicted by Balthazar's passion on the house. So the redemption was bound to proceed rapidly by the decrease of interest. Emmanuel offered besides to Marguerite the hundred thousand francs remaining to him from his uncle's bequest, which she had not used, adding twenty thousand francs of his savings, so that in the third year of her management she could pay off a considerable amount of debt. This life of courage, privations and self-sacrifice was not departed from for five years, but everything was, on the other hand, a

266 The Tragedy of a Genius

success under Marguerite's administration and influence.

Gabriel, helped by his uncle, became an engineer of roads and bridges, and made a quick fortune over a canal undertaking. He also knew how to please his cousin Mlle Conyncks, whom her father adored, one of the richest heiresses in the two Flanders. In 1824 the Claes's estates were free and the house in the Rue de Paris had repaired its losses. Pierquin positively asked Balthazar for Félicie's hand and M. de Solis asked for Marguerite's.

XIX

AT the beginning of January, 1825, Marguerite and M. Conyncks went to fetch the exiled father, whose return everyone keenly desired and who gave in his resignation in order to remain in the honour of his family, whose happiness was about to receive his sanction. In Marguerite's absence, who had often expressed regret at being unable to fill up the empty frames in the gallery and reception-rooms for the day when her father would again take over his house, Pierquin and M. de Solis plotted with Félicie to prepare for Marguerite a surprise which would make the younger sister in some sort share in the restoring of Claes House. The two had bought for Félicie several fine pictures, which they offered her for the decoration of her gallery. M. Conyncks had had the same idea. Wishing to testify to Marguerite their satisfaction at her noble conduct and her devotion in accomplishing the command bequeathed by her mother, he had taken measures for the transport of fifty of his finest canvases, and some of those which Balthazar had formerly sold, so that the Claes gallery was entirely refurnished.

Marguerite had visited her father several times, accompanied by her sister or Jean ; she had found

268 The Tragedy of a Genius

him each time more changed ; but since her last visit old age had become manifested in Balthazar with frightening symptoms, the seriousness of which was doubtless aggravated by the parsimony with which he lived, so as to be able to use the greater part of his salary on experiments which always disappointed his hopes. Although he was only sixty-five, he looked eighty. His eyes were deep-sunk, his eyebrows had whitened, a few hairs hardly covered his nape ; he let his beard grow and cut it with scissors when it bothered him ; he was bent like an old vine-dresser ; besides, the disorder of his dress had again assumed a character of poverty made hideous by decrepitude.

Although a powerful thought animated the grand visage, whose features could no longer be seen under the wrinkles, the staring look, a desperation, a constant restlessness were engraving on it the marks of madness or rather of all mad-nesses put together. Sometimes there appeared on it a hope which lent Balthazar the expression of a monomaniac ; sometimes impatience at not divining a secret that presented itself to him as a will-o'-the-wisp produced symptoms of fury ; then suddenly a loud laugh betrayed dementia ; finally, most of the time the completest dejection summed up all the shades of his passion in an idiot's cold melancholy. However fleeting and imperceptible such expressions might be to strangers they were unhappily too visible to those

who knew a Claes sublime in goodness, great in heart, handsome in countenance, and of whom there only remained a few traces.

Aged, worn-out, like his master, by constant labours, Lemulquinier had not had to endure like him the fatigues of thinking ; so his face offered a singular mixture of inquietude and admiration for his master which it was easy to misunderstand ; although he listened to his least word with respect, although he followed his least movement with a kind of affection, he looked after the savant as a mother after her child ; he might often have the pair of protecting him, because he truly protected him in the vulgar needs of life of which Balthazar never thought. The two old men enveloped in one idea, trusting in the reality of their hope, agitated by the same breath, the one representing the envelope and the other the soul of their common existences, formed a spectacle at once horrible and moving. When Marguerite and M. Conyncks arrived they found Balthazar settled in an inn ; his successor had not delayed and had already taken possession of the post.

Amid the preoccupations of science a desire to see again his country, his house, his family, excited Balthazar ; his daughter's letter had announced happy events to him : he dreamt of crowning his career by a series of experiments which should bring him at last to the solution of his problem, so he was expecting Marguerite with excessive impatience.

270 The Tragedy of a Genius

The young woman threw herself into her father's arms, weeping with joy. This time she came for the reward of a laborious life and a forgiveness for her domestic glory. She felt herself criminal, like great men who violate liberties to save their country. But on viewing her father she shuddered at noticing the changes in him since her last visit. Conyncks shared his niece's secret fright, and insisted on bringing his cousin at once to Douai, where the influence of his countryside might restore him to reason, to health, by restoring him to the happy life of the domestic hearth.

After the first heart-effusions, which were more lively on Balthazar's side than Marguerite thought, he paid her singular attention; he expressed regret at welcoming her in a rotten inn-room, he asked after her tastes, he inquired what she wanted for her meals with a lover's anxious care; in fine, he had the manner of a guilty person who wants to be sure of his judge. Marguerite knew her father so well that she guessed the motive of this affection, believing he might have various debts in the town he wished to settle before leaving. She observed her father some time and then saw the human heart naked. Balthazar had been degraded. The feeling of his abasement, the isolation in which science placed him, had made him timid and child-like in all questions alien to his favourite occupations; his eldest daughter imposed on him; the memory of her past devotion, of the strength she

had displayed, the consciousness of the power he had let her assume, the fortune at her disposal, and the indefinable feeling that had seized hold of him, since the day when he had abdicated his already compromised paternity, had doubtless magnified her to him from day to day. Conyncks seemed nothing in Balthazar's eyes, he only saw his daughter and thought of her, appearing to fear her as certain weak husbands the superior woman who has subjugated them ; when he raised his eyes to her Marguerite noticed with grief an expression of fear, like that of a child who feels himself at fault. The noble girl could not conciliate the majestic terrible expression of that skull devastated by science and labour with the puerile smile, the naïf servility that were depicted on Balthazar's lips and physiognomy. She was wounded by the contrast between that greatness and that pettiness, and promised herself to use her influence to enable her father to regain all his dignity for the solemn day when he was to reappear in the bosom of his family. First of all she seized a moment when they were alone to whisper in his ear :

“ D’you owe anything here ? ”

Balthazar reddened and replied with an embarrassed air :

“ I don’t know, but Lemulquinier will tell you. That fine fellow knows more about my business than I do myself.”

Marguerite rang for the valet, and when he

272 The Tragedy of a Genius

came studied almost involuntarily the old men's faces.

"Does Monsieur want anything?" asked Lemulquinier.

Marguerite, who was all pride and nobility, felt a pain at her heart on noticing by the valet's tone and demeanour that some evil familiarity had arisen between her father and the companion of his labours.

"So my father can't reckon without you what he owes here?" said Marguerite.

"Monsieur," replied Lemulquinier, "owes——"

At these words Balthazar gave his valet a wink, which Marguerite surprised and which humiliated her.

"Tell me all my father owes," she cried.

"Here Monsieur owes one thousand crowns to an apothecary who keeps a wholesale grocery, that provided us with caustic potash, lead, zinc, and reagents."

"Is that all?" asked Marguerite.

Balthazar again nodded affirmatively to Lemulquinier, who, fascinated by his master, answered:

"Yes, Mademoiselle."

"Well," she replied, "I'll give it you."

Balthazar joyfully kissed his daughter, saying:

"You're an angel to me, my child."

And he breathed more at ease, looking at her less gloomily, but despite his joy Marguerite

clearly saw on his face signs of deep anxiety, and judged that the thousand crowns were only the crying debts of the laboratory.

"Be frank, my father," she said, letting him draw her on his knees; "you still owe something? Confess all to me, return to your house without retaining a trace of fear amid the general joy."

"My dear Marguerite," he answered, taking her hand and kissing them with a grace that seemed a memory of youth, "you will scold me?"

"No," she said.

"True?" he asked, making a gesture of infantine joy. "So I can tell you all, you'll pay?"

"Yes," she said, repressing the coming tears.

"Well! I owe—— Oh, I don't dare!"

"But say, my father!"

"It's considerable," he rejoined.

She clasped her hands in a despairing movement.

"I owe thirty thousand francs to MM. Protez and Chiffreville."

"Thirty thousand francs," she said, "are my savings, but I have pleasure in offering you them," she added, kissing his forehead with respect.

He got up, took his daughter in his arms and turned right round about his room, making her jump like a child; then he put her back in the armchair, crying:

274 The Tragedy of a Genius

"My dear child, you're a treasure of love! I was no longer alive. The Chiffrevilles wrote me three threatening letters and wanted to prosecute me, me who helped them make a fortune."

"My father," said Marguerite sadly, "are you still investigating?"

"Always!" he said, with a madman's smile. "I'll find it, right enough! If you knew where we've got to!"

"Who's we?"

"I'm talking of Mulquinier; he has at last understood me, he's helping me, well—— Poor fellow, he's so devoted to me!"

Conyncks interrupted the conversation by entering. Marguerite signed to her father to be silent, fearing he might lower himself in their uncle's eyes. She was frightened at the ravages caused by anxiety in that great intelligence, absorbed in the solution of a perhaps insoluble problem. Balthazar, who doubtless saw nothing beyond his furnaces, did not even divine the redemption of his fortune. Next day they left for Flanders.

The journey was long enough for Marguerite to be able to get confused light on the situation as between her father and Lemulquinier. Had the valet that ascendancy over his master which may be exerted over greatest minds by uneducated persons who feel they are necessary, and who from concession to concession are able to reach

domination with the persistence given by a fixed idea? Or had the master contracted for his valet the kind of affection springing from habit and similar to that which a worker has for his creative tool, which the Arab has for his liberating steed? Marguerite watched for some facts to decide, proposing to remove Balthazar from a humiliating yoke if it existed.

Passing through Paris she remained there a few days to settle her father's debts, and ask the chemical manufacturers to send nothing to Douai without informing her first what Claes might have ordered. She won the point from her father that he should change his costume and resume the toilette habits suitable to a man of his rank. This corporal restoration gave Balthazar again a kind of physical dignity which was of good omen for a change of ideas. Soon his daughter, happy in advance at all the surprises awaiting her father in his own house, left again for Douai.

At three leagues from the town Balthazar met his daughter Félicie on horseback escorted by her brothers, by Emmanuel, Pierquin, and the intimate friends of the three families. The journey had necessarily distracted the chemist from his usual thoughts, the sight of Flanders had reacted on his heart; so when he perceived the glad cortège formed by his family and friends he felt such keen emotions that his eyes moistened, his voice quivered, his eyeballs reddened, and he kissed his

276 The Tragedy of a Genius

children so passionately without being able to leave them, that the spectators of the scene were moved to tears.

When he saw his house again he paled, jumped out of the carriage with a young man's agility, breathed in the air of the court with delight, and began gazing at the least details with a pleasure which overflowed in gesture ; he drew himself up and his countenance became young again. When he entered the parlour he had tears in his eyes, as he saw by the exactness with which his daughter had reproduced his old silver candlesticks he had sold that the disaster must have been entirely retrieved.

A splendid lunch was served in the dining-room, whose sideboards had been filled with curiosities and plate of a value at least equal to that of the pieces formerly there. Although the family repast lasted long, it was scarce sufficient for the accounts demanded by Balthazar from each of his children. The shock impressed on his morale by this return made him espouse his family's happiness, and he showed himself a true father. His manners resumed their former nobility. In the first moments he was all absorbed in the enjoyment of possession without asking himself for an account of the means by which he had recovered all he had lost. So his joy was entire and full. Lunch over, the four children, the father and Pierquin the notary passed in to the parlour, where Balthazar saw not without disquiet some stamped papers which a

clerk had set on a table, at which he stood as if to help his employer. The children sat down and Balthazar, astonished, remained upright by the fire-place.

"This," said Pierquin, "is the account of the guardianship rendered by M. Claes to his children. Doubtless it's not very amusing," he added, laughing after the fashion of notaries who very generally assume a joking tone when talking of the most serious affairs, "but it's absolutely necessary you should listen to it."

Though the circumstances justified the phrase, M. Claes, whose conscience recalled his past life, accepted it as a reproach and frowned. The clerk began reading. Balthazar's amazement went on increasing as the document was being revealed. It was there established firstly that his wife's fortune at the time of her death amounted to about one million six hundred thousand francs, and the conclusion of this rendering of accounts clearly provided each of her children with a complete share as would have happened in the case of a good and careful family-father. The result was that the house was free of mortgage, that Balthazar was at home, and that his country estates were likewise disencumbered. When the various documents were signed, Pierquin presented the receipts for the sums once borrowed and the withdrawals of the mortgages that burdened the properties.

At that moment Balthazar, who had recovered

278 The Tragedy of a Genius

at one blow his honour as a man, his life as a father, his respect as a citizen, fell into an arm-chair ; he sought for Marguerite who, by one of those sublime feminine delicacies, had absented herself during the reading, in order to see if all her intentions had been properly carried out for the fête. Each of the members of the family understood the old man's thoughts at the moment when his weakly moist eyes asked for his daughter, whom all at this moment through the eyes of the soul looked upon as an angel of strength and light. Gabriel went for Marguerite. Hearing his daughter's step, Balthazar ran and clasped her in his arms.

" My father," she said to him at the foot of the stairs where the old man seized hold of her to embrace her, " I beg you not to diminish in anything your holy authority. Thank me before the whole family for having well fulfilled your plans and thus be the sole author of the good that has been done here."

Balthazar raised his eyes to heaven, looked at his daughter, folded his arms and said, after a pause, during which his visage again took on an expression his children had not seen for ten years :

" Why are you not here, Pépita, to admire our child ? "

He clasped Marguerite vigorously without being able to utter a word and returned.

" My children," he said with the nobility of mien that formerly made him one of the most imposing of men, " we all owe thanks and grati-

tude to my daughter Marguerite for the wisdom and courage with which she has carried out my plans, fulfilled my intentions, when over-absorbed by my work I confided to her the reins of our domestic government."

"Ah! now we'll read the marriage contracts," said Pierguin, looking at the clock. "But those documents don't concern me, since the law does not allow me to draw up instruments for my relations and for myself. M. Raparlier, my uncle, is about to come."

At that moment the friends of the family invited to the dinner given in honour of M. Claes's return and to celebrate the signing of the contracts arrived one by one whilst the servants carried the wedding presents. The gathering quickly grew, and became as imposing through the quality of the persons as it was handsome through the richness of the dresses. The three families that were being invited by their children's happiness had wanted to rival in splendour. In an instant the parlour was full of the graceful presents which are made to fiancés. Gold rustled and glittered. Unfolded stuffs, cashmere shawls, necklaces, jewellery excited to so genuine a joy in those who gave and those who received, the half-childlike joy was so clearly painted on all countenances, that the value of the magnificent presents was forgotten by the indifferent, who are very often busy in calculating it out of curiosity.

Soon began the ceremonial customary in the

280 The Tragedy of a Genius

Claes family for such solemnities. The father and mother alone had to be seated, and the rest remained standing before them at a distance. On the left of the parlour and on the side of the garden stood Gabriel Claes and Mlle Conyncks, near whom were M. de Solis and Marguerite, her sister and Pierquin. A few paces from these three couples Balthazar and Conyncks, the only ones in the assembly who were seated, took their places, each in an arm-chair, near the notary who replaced Pierquin. Jean stood behind his father. Twenty elegantly dressed women and some men, all chosen among the nearest relations of the Pierquins, Conynckses and Claeses, the Mayor of Douai who was to marry the couples, the twelve witnesses selected from the most devoted friends of the three families and one of whom was the First President of the Royal Court, all, including the Curé of Saint-Pierre, remained standing and formed an imposing circle on the side of the courtyard. The homage rendered by this whole gathering to the paternity which at that instant beamed with a regal majesty impressed an antique hue on the scene. It was the only moment in sixteen years during which Balthazar forgot the search for the absolute. M. Raparlier, the notary, went and asked Marguerite and her sister if all the persons invited to the signing and to the dinner that was to follow had arrived; and on their affirmative answer he went back to take up the marriage contract of Marguerite and

The Tragedy of a Genius 281

M. de Solis which had to be read first, when suddenly the parlour door was flung open and Lemulquinier appeared, his face beaming with joy :

“ Monsieur ! Monsieur ! ”

XX

BALTHAZAR threw Marguerite a look of despair, beckoned to her, and took her into the garden. Anxiety at once arose in the company.

"I didn't dare tell you, my child," said the father to his daughter, "but as you've done so much for me you'll save me from this fresh misfortune. Lemulquinier lent me for a last experiment which didn't succeed twenty thousand francs, the fruit of his economies. The poor fellow has no doubt come to ask them back, learning that I've again become rich; give it him at once. Ah! my angel, you owe your father to him, for he alone comforted me in my disasters, he alone has still faith in me. Truly without him I should be dead——"

"Monsieur! Monsieur!" cried Lemulquinier.

"Well?" said Balthazar, turning round.

"A diamond!"

Claes flung into the parlour on perceiving a diamond in his valet's hand, who whispered:

"I went to the laboratory——"

The chemist who had forgotten everything glanced at the old Fleming, and that glance could

The Tragedy of a Genius 283

only be translated by the words: "*You were the first to go to the laboratory!*"

"And," continued the valet, "I found this diamond in the capsule communicating with the pile which we had left in working order to produce something; and it has produced, Monsieur!" he added, showing a white diamond, octahedric in form, whose brilliance attracted the whole party's amazed regards.

"My children, my friends," said Balthazar, "forgive my old servant, forgive me!—This will send me mad. A chance in seven years has produced without me a discovery I've been seeking sixteen years. How? I don't know. Yes, I had left sulphide of carbon under the influence of a voltaic pile whose action ought to have been watched daily. Well, during my absence God's power burst forth in my laboratory without my being able to check its effects, progressive effects, of course! Isn't that awful? Accursed exile! Accursed chance! Alas! If I had watched this long, this slow, this sudden—how shall I call it?—crystallisation, transformation, in fact, this miracle, well, my children would be still richer. Although it's not the solving of the problem I am investigating, at least the first beams of my glory would have shone on my country, and this moment which our gratified affections make so ardent with happiness would be further warmed by the sun of science!"

Everyone was silent in this man's presence.

284 The Tragedy of a Genius

The incoherent words borne from him by grief were too true not to be sublime.

Suddenly Balthazar thrust back his despair deep within himself, cast on the company a majestic look which shone in their souls, took the diamond and offered it to Marguerite, exclaiming :

"It belongs to you, my angel."

He then dismissed Lemulquinier by a gesture, and said to the notary :

"Let us continue."

The phrase aroused in the gathering the shiver which Talma in certain parts caused among the attentive crowds. Balthazar had sat down, muttering to himself :

"I must be nothing but a father to-day."

Marguerite heard the words, came forward, seized her father's hand and kissed it respectfully.

"Never has a man been so great," said Emmanuel when his fiancée returned to him, "never was a man so powerful; any other would have gone mad."

The contracts read and signed, everybody eagerly questioned Balthazar about the way in which the diamond had formed; but he had nothing to reply about so strange an accident. He gazed at his garret and pointed to it with a gesture of anger.

"Yes, the awful power due to the movement of ignited matter which no doubt has made metals,

The Tragedy of a Genius 285

diamonds," he said, "appeared there for a moment by chance."

"That chance is doubtless quite natural," said one of those people who want to explain everything, "the worthy man must have forgotten some real diamond. It's so much saved out of what he burnt——"

"Let's forget it," said Balthazar to his friends. "I beg you not to talk to me about it to-day."

Marguerite took her father's arm to enter the rooms of the front house where a sumptuous fête awaited him. When he went into the gallery after all his guests he saw it furnished with pictures and filled with rare flowers.

"Pictures!" he cried. "Pictures!—and some of our old ones!"

He stopped, his forehead grew dark, he had a moment of sadness, and felt then the weight of his faults by measuring the extent of his secret humiliation.

"It all belongs to you, my father," said Marguerite, guessing at Balthazar's feelings.

"Angel whom the heavenly spirits must applaud," he exclaimed, "how many times have you not given your father life?"

"Don't retain any cloud on your forehead nor the least gloomy thought in your heart," she answered, "and you'll have rewarded me beyond my hopes. I've just thought about Lemulquinier, my darling father; the few words you told me about him cause me to esteem him, and

286 The Tragedy of a Genius

I confess I had ill judged the man; don't think any more about what you owe him, he'll remain by you as a humble friend. Emmanuel possesses about sixty thousand francs savings, we'll give them to Lemulquinier. After serving you so well the man ought to be happy the rest of his days. Don't worry about us! M. de Solis and I will have a calm, gentle life, a life without extravagance; so we can do without the money until you return it to us."

"Ah! my daughter, never leave me! be ever your father's providence——"

On entering the reception-rooms Balthazar found them restored and furnished as magnificently as of yore. The guests soon went into the big dining-room on the ground floor by the big staircase, on every step of which were flowers in bloom. Some wonderful silver plate, presented by Gabriel to his father, attracted attention as much as a table luxury which seemed unparalleled to the chief inhabitants of a town where such luxury is habitually in fashion. The servants of Conyncks, Claes, and Pierquin were there to serve the luxurious meal. Seeing himself in the middle of the table crowned by relations, friends, and faces on which shone a keen and sincere delight, Balthazar, behind whom stood Lemulquinier, felt so piercing an emotion that everyone grew silent, as one becomes in the presence of great joys or great griefs.

"Dear children," he cried, "you've killed

The Tragedy of a Genius 287

the fattened calf for the prodigal father's return ! ”

This phrase, in which the scientist did justice to himself and which perhaps prevented it from being made severer for himself, was so nobly uttered that everybody was touched to tears ; but it was the last expression of melancholy, joy insensibly assumed the noisy, lively stamp of family rejoicings. After dinner the principal inhabitants of the town arrived for the ball, which was equal to the classical splendour of Claes House restored. The three marriages took place quickly and gave rise to parties, balls, repasts, which for several months whirled old Claes into society. His eldest son went and settled on Conyncks's estate near Cambrai, as Conyncks *never wished to be away from his daughter*. Mme Pierquin likewise left the paternal house to do the honours of the mansion Pierquin had had built and where he intended to live nobly, for his business was sold and his uncle Des Racquets had just died, leaving him treasures slowly economised. Jean left for Paris, where he was to finish his education.

So the Solises remained alone with their father who left them the rear-quarters, himself living on the second floor of the front house. Marguerite continued to watch over Balthazar's material happiness, and was aided in the sweet task by Emmanuel.

The noble girl received by the hands of love

288 The Tragedy of a Genius

the most envied crown, that which happiness bestows and whose lustre is maintained by constancy. Indeed, never did a couple better present the image of that complete, avowed, pure felicity which all women caress in their dreams. The union of those two beings, so courageous in life's trials and who had so holily loved, excited respectful admiration in the town. M. de Solis, who had been long appointed inspector-general of the University, resigned so as to better enjoy his happiness and remain at Douai, where everyone rendered such homage to his talents and character that his name was promised in advance for the balloting of the electoral assemblies when the age for deputyship should arrive. Marguerite, who had proved herself so strong in adversity, again became in her happiness a gentle, kindly woman.

Claes remained during this year seriously preoccupied, no doubt; but though he made a few inexpensive experiments for which his means sufficed, he seemed to neglect his laboratory. Marguerite, who reassumed the old customs of Claes House, gave her father every month a family party, to which the Pierquins and Conynckses came, and received the high society of the town on a day of the week when she had a *coffee*, which became one of the most famous. Although often abstracted, Claes attended all the gatherings and became again so obligingly a society man to please his eldest daughter, that his children might well believe he had given up seeking

The Tragedy of a Genius 289

the solution of his problem. So three years went by.

In 1828 an event favourable to Emmanuel called him to Spain. Although there were three numerous branches between himself and the property of the Solis family, yellow fever, old age, childlessness, all the whims of chance united to make Emmanuel the heir to the titles and wealth of his line, he, the last one. By one of those hazards that are only improbable in books, the Solis family had acquired the Countship of Nourho. Marguerite did not wish to separate from her husband, who had to remain in Spain as long as his affairs required ; she was moreover curious to see the castle of Casa-Réal, where her mother had spent her childhood, and the town of Granada, the patrimonial cradle of the Solis family. She went off, entrusting the control of the house to the devotion of Martha, Josette and Lemulquinier, who were accustomed to carry it on. Balthazar, to whom Marguerite had proposed the voyage to Spain, had refused on account of his great age ; but several operations, meditated for a long time, which were to realise his hopes, were the real reason of his refusal.

The Count and Countess de Solis y Nourho remained in Spain longer than they wished. Marguerite bore a child there. In the middle of 1830 they were at Cadiz, where they reckoned on embarking for their return to France through Italy ; but they there received a letter, in which

290 The Tragedy of a Genius

Félicie gave her sister sad news. Their father had utterly ruined himself in eighteen months. Gabriel and Pierquin had to give Lemulquinier a monthly sum for household expenses. The old servant had once more sacrificed his fortune for his master. Balthazar refused to receive any one, even his children, in the house. Josette and Martha were dead. The coachman, the cook and the other servants had been successively dismissed. The horses and carriages were sold.

Although Lemulquinier was profoundly silent about his master's habits, it was believable that the monthly thousand francs given by Gabriel Claes and by Pierquin were used in experiments. The few provisions the valet bought in the market made it credible that the old men were contented with strict necessities. Lastly, in order not to let the paternal house be sold, Gabriel and Pierquin paid the interest on the money borrowed by Claes, unknown to them, on it. None of his children had any influence on the old man, who at seventy displayed an extraordinary energy for the executing of all his wishes, even the most absurd. Marguerite might alone perhaps resume the ascendancy she had once exercised over Balthazar, and Félicie implored her sister to come quickly; she feared her father had signed some bills of exchange. Gabriel, Conyncks and Pierquin, all frightened at the continuing of a madness which had eaten up about seven million with-

The Tragedy of a Genius 291

out result, had decided not to pay M. Claes's debts.

This letter altered Marguerite's arrangements, who took the nearest way to Douai. Her savings and her new fortune allowed her indeed to pay her father's debts once more; but she wished more than that, she wished to obey her mother by not letting Balthazar go to the grave dishonoured. Certainly she alone could exert enough ascendancy over the old man to prevent him from continuing his work of ruin at an age at which no fruitful work could be expected from his weakened faculties. But she desired to rule without estranging him, so as not to imitate Sophocles's children, in case her father should approach the scientific goal to which he had sacrificed so much.

M. and Mme de Solis reached Flanders about the last days of September, 1831, and reached Douai in the morning. Marguerite stopped at her house in the Rue de Paris and found it shut. The bell was violently rung without an answer. A tradesman came out of his shop, drawn by the noise of the carriages. Many persons were at the windows to enjoy the sight of the return of a household beloved in the whole town, and also attracted by the vague curiosity attached to the events which Marguerite's arrival presupposed in Claes House. The tradesman told Count de Solis's valet that old Claes had gone out about an hour since. Doubtless Lemulquinier was taking his master for a walk on the ramparts.

292 The Tragedy of a Genius

Marguerite sent for a locksmith to open the door so as to avoid the scene arising from her father's resistance if, as Félicie had written, he refused to admit her. Meanwhile Emmanuel went after the old man to inform him of his daughter's arrival, whilst his valet hurried off to inform M. and Mme Pierquin.

The door was opened in a moment. Marguerite entered the parlour to have her luggage put there, and shuddered with terror at seeing the walls bare, as if they had been on fire. The wonderful wainscotings, executed by Van Huysium, and the President's portrait had been sold to Lord Spencer, it was said. The dining-room was empty, there were only two straw chairs in it and a common table, on which Marguerite noticed with fright two dishes, two bowls, two silver covers, and on a plate the remains of a herring, which Claes and his valet had doubtless just shared. In an instant she hastened through the house whose every room showed her the desolating spectacle of a nudity similar to that of the parlour and dining-room. The idea of the absolute had passed everywhere like a fire. The only furniture in her father's room was a bed, a chair, and a table, on which was a cheap copper candlestick, in which the night before a piece of the worst kind of candle had gone out. The denuding was so complete that the windows had no curtains. The smallest object that might be of value in the house, everything, even to the kitchen utensils, had been sold.

The Tragedy of a Genius 293

Stirred by the curiosity which does not quit us even in misfortune, Marguerite entered Lemulquinier's room, which was as bare as his master's. In the half-closed table-drawer she saw a pawn-ticket testifying that the valet had pledged his watch a few days before. She ran to the laboratory and saw the room full of scientific instruments, as in the past.

She had her own apartment opened : her father had respected everything there.

At her first glance Marguerite burst into tears and forgave her father everything. Amid that devastating fury, he had been stayed by fatherly feeling and the gratitude he owed his daughter ! This proof of kindness received at a time when Marguerite's despair was at its height caused one of those moral reactions against which the coldest hearts are powerless. She went down to the parlour and there awaited her father's arrival, in an anxiety terribly increased by doubt. How was she about to see him again ? Ruined, decrepit, suffering, weakened by the fasts he endured through pride ? But would he be in his senses ? Tears flowed from her eyes without notice on coming again to this devastated sanctuary. The images of her whole life, her efforts, her useless precautions, her infancy, her mother happy and unhappy, everything, up to the sight of her little Joseph, who smiled at this spectacle of desolation, composed for her a poem of excruciating sadness.

294 The Tragedy of a Genius

But though she foresaw misfortunes she did not expect the *dénouement* that was to crown her father's life, that life so grandiose and so wretched at the same time.

XXI

M. CLAES'S condition was no secret to any one. To the shame of mankind there were not two generous hearts at Douai which gave honour to the perseverance of the genius. The whole of society regarded Balthazar as a man to ban, as a bad father who had eaten up six fortunes, millions of francs, and was looking for the philosopher's stone in the nineteenth century, the enlightened century, the incredulous century, the century of—etc. He was calumniated by being branded with the name of alchemist, by sneering at him: "He wants to make gold!" What eulogies were not passed on this century in which, as in all others, talent expires beneath an indifference as brutal as that of the ages in which died Dante, Cervantes, Tasso, and the rest? The masses understand even more slowly the creations of genius than the kings used to.

Such opinion had gradually filtered from the Douaisian high society into the burgessry, and from the burgessry among the common people. So the septuagenarian chemist excited a deep feeling of pity among well-educated people, a jeering curiosity in the crowd, two grossly contemptuous expressions of the "*Væ victis!*" by

296 The Tragedy of a Genius

which great men are crushed by the masses when they see them miserable. Many persons came and stood before Claes House, to have the attic pointed out where so much gold and coal had been consumed.

When Balthazar passed he was pointed at; often at the sight of him a mocking or pitying phrase would escape the lips of some working-man or child; but Lemulquinier took care to translate it to him as praise and was able to deceive him with impunity. Though Balthazar's eyes had preserved the sublime clearness impressed by the habit of great thoughts, his sense of hearing had weakened.

To many peasants, to vulgar and superstitious people the old man was a sorcerer. The noble, the great Claes House was called in suburban districts and the country the devil's house. Even Lemulquinier's face lent itself to the ridiculous beliefs spread about his master. So, when the poor old helot went to market for the necessities of life, and he chose the cheaper articles in everything, he got nothing without revilings; happy even often if some superstitious tradesman did not refuse to sell him his meagre provisions, fearing to be damned by contact with an emissary from hell.

Thus the feelings of the whole town was generally hostile to the grand old man and his companion. The disorder of their clothes added to this: they went clad like those ashamed poor who preserve

The Tragedy of a Genius 297

a decent outside and hesitate to ask alms. Sooner or later the two old folk might be insulted. Pierquin, knowing how dishonouring to the family a public insult would be, always sent, during his father-in-law's walks, two or three of his servants, who surrounded him at a distance with the purpose of protecting him, for the July Revolution had not helped to make the people respectful.

By an inexplicable fatality Claes and Lemulquinier going out very early had evaded M. and Mme Pierquin's secret watch and were alone in the town. On returning from their walk they went and sat in the sun on a bench in the Place Saint-Jacques, where some children were going to school or college. Seeing afar off the old men defenceless, with their faces beaming in the sun, the children began to talk of them. The children's talks usually soon come to laughter : from laughter they proceeded to hoaxing, without knowing their cruelty. Seven or eight of the first arrivals kept at a distance and began examining the two old faces, whilst restraining the stifled laughter which attracted Lemulquinier's attention.

" I say, d'you see that one whose head's like a knee ? "

" Yes."

" Well, he was born a savant."

" Papa says he makes gold," said another.

The smallest of the band, who had his basket full of provisions and was licking a slice of bread

298 The Tragedy of a Genius

and butter, advanced simply to the bench and said to Lemulquinier :

" Is it true, sir, you make pearls and diamonds?"

" Yes, little one," answered Lemulquinier, smiling and patting him on the cheek. " We'll give you some when you're very wise."

" Ah, sir, give me some also!" was the general cry.

All the children ran up like a flock of birds and encircled the chemists. Balthazar, absorbed in thought from which he was drawn by the exclamations, then made a gesture of astonishment that caused general laughter.

" Come now, boys, respect for a great man!" said Lemulquinier.

" Boo-oo!" cried the children. " You're sorcerers—yes, sorcerers! old sorcerers! sorcerers! Boo-oo!"

Lemulquinier jumped to his feet and threatened the children with his stick: they fled, collecting mud and stones. A workman who was lunching a few paces off, having seen Lemulquinier raising his cane to drive away the boys, believed he had struck them and backed them up with the terrible phrase :

" Down with the sorcerers!"

The boys, finding themselves supported, threw their projectiles, which struck the old men at the moment when the Count de Solis was appearing at the end of the square accompanied by Pierquin's servants. They did not arrive soon enough

The Tragedy of a Genius 299

to prevent the boys from covering the great old man and his valet with filth.

The blow had found its mark. Balthazar, whose faculties had been till then preserved by the chastity natural to scientists whose preoccupation with a discovery annihilates the passions, divine the secret of the scene ; his decrepit body did not endure the awful reaction he felt in the high region of his feelings, he fell struck with paralysis into Lemulquinier's arms, who brought him back to his home on a stretcher, surrounded by his two sons-in-law and their servants. No power could prevent the populace of Douai from escorting the old man to the door of his house, where were Félicie and her children, Jean, Marguerite, and Gabriel, who, informed by his sister, had come with his wife from Cambrai.

The old man's entry was a fearful sight ; he struggled less against death than against the fright of seeing his children penetrate the secret of his wretchedness. A bed was at once made in the middle of the parlour, care was lavished on Balthazar, whose condition towards the end of the day allowed of some hopes for his recovery. The paralysis, though skilfully combated, left him all the same a considerably long time in a state neighbouring childhood. When the paralysis had gradually ceased it remained on his tongue, which it had specially affected, perhaps because anger had concentrated there all the old man's strength at the instant he wanted to apostrophise the children.

300 The Tragedy of a Genius

The scene had excited general indignation in the town. By a still unknown law which guides the affections of the masses this episode brought everybody round to M. Claes's side. In a moment he became a great man, he stirred admiration and won all the sentiments he was refused the day before. Everyone bragged of his patience, his will, his courage, his genius. The magistrates wanted to proceed against those who had taken part in the assault; but the evil was done. The Claes family were the first to ask for the hushing-up of the affair.

Marguerite had ordered the parlour to be furnished, whose naked walls were soon covered with silk. When some days later the old father had recovered his faculties and found himself again in elegant surroundings, with everything needful for a happy life, he desired the presence of his daughter at the very moment Marguerite was coming in; seeing her, Balthazar reddened, his eyes moistened without any tears flowing. He could press his daughter's hand with his cold fingers and put into the pressure all the feelings and ideas he could no longer express.

There was something holy and solemn in the farewell of the brain that still lived, of the heart revived by gratitude. Exhausted by his fruitless attempts, wearied by his struggle with a gigantic problem, and made desperate perhaps by the obscurity destined for his memory, the giant was soon about to cease living; all his children sur-

The Tragedy of a Genius 301

rounded him with a respectful feeling, so that his eyes might be refreshed by the images of abundance, of wealth, and by the touching picture of his fine family. He was even affectionate in his looks, by which he could show his sentiments; his eyes suddenly gained so great a variety of expression that they had, as it were, a language of light, easy to understand.

Marguerite paid her father's debts and in a few days restored Claes House to a modern splendour which must banish any idea of decadence. She no longer left Balthazar's bedside, whose every thought she tried to guess and accomplish his least wishes.

Some months passed in the alternations of ill and good which mark in old men the struggle between life and death. Every morning his children came to him, remained in the parlour during the day, dining near his bed, and only went out when he fell asleep. What pleased him most among all the distractions they got up for him was the reading of the papers which political events then made very interesting. M. Claes listened attentively as M. de Solis read in a loud voice near him.

Towards the end of 1832 Balthazar spent a very critical night, during which M. Pierquin, the doctor, was summoned by the nurse, who was frightened by a sudden change in the patient; in truth the doctor wished to watch him, fearing at every instant he would die under the effects

302 The Tragedy of a Genius

of an inward crisis whose results bore the character of a death-agony.

The old man threw himself into movements of an incredible force in order to shake off the bonds of paralysis; he desired to speak and moved his tongue without being able to form sounds; his flaming eyes projected thoughts; his drawn features expressed unheard-of pain; his fingers were desperately agitated, he sweated big drops.

In the morning the children came and kissed their father with the affection which the fear of neighbouring death caused them to show forth every day more ardently and more keenly; but he did not show them the satisfaction which he usually felt at such signs of tenderness.

Emmanuel, advised by Pierquin, hastened to open the paper to see if the reading of it would divert the inward crisis through which Balthazar was passing.

On unfolding it, he saw the words "*Discovery of the Absolute*," which greatly struck him, and he read to Marguerite an article in which there was mention of a process relating to a sale of the absolute which a famous Polish mathematician had carried out.

Although Emmanuel read in quite a low voice the announcement of the fact to Marguerite, who begged him to omit the article, Balthazar had heard.

Suddenly the dying man raised himself up on his fists, cast on his frightened children a look that

The Tragedy of a Genius 303

struck them all like a flash of lightning, the hair on the nape of his neck stirred, his wrinkles quivered, his visage was enlivened by a spirit of fire, a breath passed over that face and rendered it sublime, he lifted a hand writhing in rage and cried in a stentorian voice Archimedes's famous word "EUREKA!" (*I have found*).

He fell back on the bed, making the heavy noise of an inert body: he died uttering a fearful groan, and his convulsed eyes expressed, up to the time when the doctor closed them, regret at having been unable to bequeath to science the solution of an enigma whose veil had been tardily torn asunder by the pitiless fingers of death.

THE LOTUS LIBRARY

Purple
Cloth

2/- net

Size
 $6\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{8}$

Each Volume has a distinctive Coloured Wrapper by

A. FARQUHAR TYLER

Translations of the greatest French, German, Russian,
Italian, and Turkish Novels

1. A GOOD-NATURED FELLOW PAUL DE KOCK
2. A PASSION OF THE SOUTH ALPHONSE DAUDET
3. SAPHO ALPHONSE DAUDET
4. THE ROMANCE OF A SPAHI PIERRE LOTI
5. THAIS ANATOLE FRANCE
6. OUR LADY OF LIES PAUL BOURGET
7. THE RED SHIRTS PAUL GAULOT
8. MADAME BOVARY GUSTAVE FLAUBERT
9. THE POPINJAY ALPHONSE DAUDET
10. SALAMMBÔ GUSTAVE FLAUBERT
11. THE WOMAN OF THE HILL
"UNE CIRCASSIENNE"
12. A MODERN MAN'S CONFESSION
ALFRED AND PAUL DE MUSSET
13. A WOMAN'S HEART PAUL BOURGET
14. SEBASTOPOL LEO TOLSTOY
15. THE TRAGEDY OF A GENIUS
HONORÉ DE BALZAC

Further Titles in preparation